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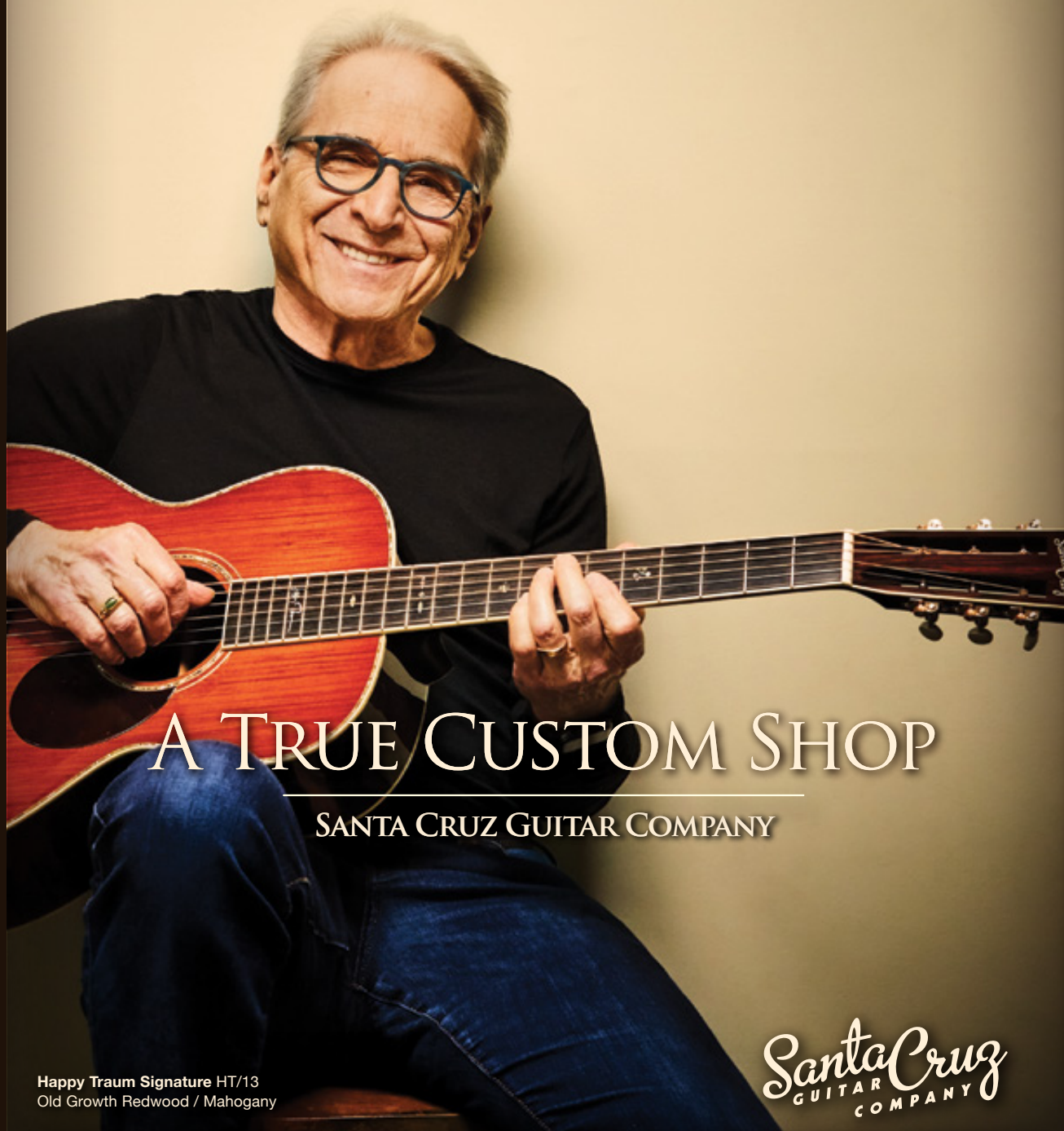
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an art that  
ennobles  
all of us!'  
—ELIOT FISK  
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**Photographer**  
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COURTESY OF WILLIAM EATON

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Mandy Rowden, Austin, Texas-based singer songwriter and founder of Girl Guitar Austin, shows you how to get started in this short and easy-to-follow video lesson. As you'll see, it's easy to take what Mandy demonstrates here and transpose it to whatever key you're playing in!

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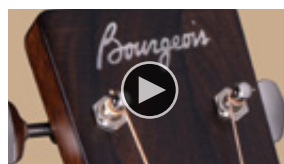
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## THE FRONT PORCH

Grant Gordy



JACOB BLICKENSTAFF

Sometime around 2015, I happened upon a video, hosted by the boutique shop Dream Guitars, of guitarists Grant Gordy and Ross Martin seated with a pair of Collings dreadnoughts in hand. I was delighted to find that instead of the expected fiddle or bluegrass tune, the duo was playing an arrangement of the modern jazz standard “Bright Size Life,” by guitar luminary Pat Metheny.

Recently I found myself wondering what Gordy had been up to, when the guitarist just so happened to send me a link to his latest release, *Peripheral Visions*, which I ended up immediately listening to from beginning to end. To say that I was impressed by what I heard is an understatement. Gordy’s command of jazz harmony and his melodic inventiveness really drew me in, as did his deft arranging for classic string-band quartet.

In this issue’s cover story, Gordy explains how he arrived at his unique synthesis of bluegrass, jazz, and other American sounds, especially apparent on *Peripheral Visions*. Gordy was kind enough to give *AG* permission to include the notation of his unaccompanied guitar intro to “To Ron,” a tribute to late jazz trumpeter Ron Miles, as part of the piece. I highly recommend you study it along with the original recording; there’s a good chance you’ll come away with a few colorful chords that your fingers hadn’t made before.

Stepping away from habitual chords, patterns, and repertoire is always an excellent way

to freshen things up when your playing has reached a plateau. In this issue’s special section, editor at large Jeffrey Pepper Rodgers connects with ten different guitarists and educators—Janet Feld, Larry Baione, Stash Wyslouchy, Adam Levy, Al Petteway, David Hamburger, Frank Vignola, Vicki Genfan, Karen Hogg, and Molly Miller—who offer practical tips for breaking out of your comfort zone. Whether playing material you already know in new ways or coming up with completely random patterns on the fretboard, you’ll find great advice for taking your musicianship to a higher level.

The idea of treating familiar music in a fresh manner is also seen in Alan Barnosky’s *Pickin’* column. Barnosky usually presents traditional and fiddle tunes in these pages, but this time he adapts a well-known Baroque keyboard work, J.S. Bach’s “Prelude No. 1 in C Major” from *The Well Tempered Clavier, Book 1*, for flatpicking guitar. Some of the fretting-hand patterns might be a bit tricky—but they are well worth the challenge, not just for adding a beautiful piece to your repertoire, but for training your fingers to do new things.

Though the pages indicate March/April, this is in fact the first issue of *AG* published in 2023. I hope that with the new year you find fresh inspiration in the things you listen to and play on the guitar.

—Adam Perlmutter

[Adam.Perlmutter@Stringletter.com](mailto:Adam.Perlmutter@Stringletter.com)



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IRENE YOUNG

## A True Guitar Nerd

After more than 40 albums, prolific singer-songwriter John McCutcheon is as in love with his instruments as ever

BY EMILE MENASCHÉ

On the other side of our Zoom connection, John McCutcheon is holding his custom-built single cutaway Huss & Dalton in front of studio-quality mics. Seeing him in a room full of instruments—which looks like a cross between a homey front parlor, recording studio, and broadcast set—it's easy to imagine dozens more guitars stacked just outside the camera's range. Surely, after more than five decades as a sort of folk music anthropologist with a seemingly limitless passion for musical traditions and the instruments that express them, McCutcheon has accumulated a warehouse of trophy guitars—not to mention banjos, fiddles, mandolins, dulcimers, and more.

But as I was to learn, the self-confessed guitar nerd—whose latest album, *Leap*, is the 43rd of a discography dating back to the mid 1970s and his third since the pandemic—doesn't keep what he doesn't play. Like the characters in his songs—for instance, the World War I British soldier in “Christmas in the Trenches”—he wants his instruments to have a purpose, to lead active lives. From his choice of guitar to his stage setup, McCutcheon approaches his gear with the purposeful approach of the gitting musician.

Yet, as you might expect from such a narrative songwriter, each of his guitars has a bit of a story behind it, from discovering a new brand

to ad-libbing through slotted headstock string changes to tracking down discontinued electronics and making an early 20th-century classic playable in the modern day.

**You've recorded three albums since the pandemic: *Cabin Fever: Songs from the Quarantine* (2020), *Bucket List* (2021), and now *Leap* (2022). How did you write that many songs during Covid?**

I came back from an Australian tour in March 2020, a day or two after the United States realized something really weird was going on. They weren't aware of it at all in Australia. So there were plenty of festivals—you know, big





malarial tents with 3,000 or 4,000 people. I hopped off that tubular petri dish that is an airplane and felt like the only responsible thing to do was to quarantine myself. I have a little cabin in the North Georgia mountains; with my faithful hound, I repaired up there. And relieved of the daily chores of being at home, with no gigs and with no idea when I would have a gig again, I said, “Well, I’m just going to write every day.”

#### How did you get those ideas recorded?

I have a little studio setup at my cabin. I would make a simple demo of the song, then forget about it. And write another song the next day and the next day and the next day. It was a lovely kind of habit.

I did *Cabin Fever*, comprised of the songs I wrote during that 2020 three-week quarantine—just a guy and his instrument. But after about a year and a half, I realized I had way over 100 songs. For *Bucket List*, it was clear which songs

arrangement. And then fiddle player Stuart Duncan—what can I say about him? He was the prototype that God made when he said, “I’m going to create a fiddle player now.” He just really pulls everything together and knows when to play and when not to.

#### How did your guitar style evolve?

I came up as a teenager playing fingerstyle back in the 1960s. And then in the 1970s, I got tugged into Appalachian music. I moved into the Appalachian region. I was playing with more of a bluegrass-type group and I can go

there if need be. Today, I tend to be more fingerstyle. But I end up incorporating some more hard-edged acoustic ideas with fingerstyle bass parts that are a little more bluegrass.

#### What was your first guitar?

On my 14th birthday I got a bright red Silvertone electric guitar. It was red and all up and down the neck had those big white blocks of inlay that my best friend dubbed mother-of-toilet-seat. We had been obsessed with folk music for years. This is North Central Wisconsin, you know—we’re not going down to the Gaslight in

**‘If a guitar sits in the closet unplayed for longer than a year, it feels like a violation of some kind of ethics!’**

—JOHN MCCUTCHEON

belonged together. *Leap* has a lot of really complicated songs that didn’t belong on *Bucket List*, but I thought I needed to get out there.

#### Unlike *Cabin Fever*, *Leap* has full band arrangements. Did you finally get back to the studio?

I sent [audio] files around to my usual band-mates. They put their stuff together and then we sent one giant Frankenstein of a project to my recording engineer. And so it had a little more fleshed-out sound.

#### I find that surprising. The performances feel very interactive and sound almost live.

Well, it’s a tribute to these guys who have been my recording band for a long time. I love their work because they *listen*. And they’ll call me up and say, “Tell me about this song.” Studio guys usually don’t do that. Also, I’m not giving them charts. We collaboratively figure out the

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Greenwich Village on the weekends. We were lonely pilgrims out there in the hinterlands trying to figure out this folk music stuff. And I first saw it at the [1963] March on Washington when I was 11. My mom made me sit down and watch it with her. And there was Bob Dylan and Peter, Paul and Mary, and Joan Baez and Odetta. There was this music and they were playing guitars. So after three years of hectoring my parents, they gave me that Silver-tone guitar and I was in heaven.

#### What about your first good acoustic?

I think the first was some kind of a Gibson—maybe a J-45. But then I got a Guild D-50, which was my guitar for the longest time. And that's what I was playing when I first started playing professionally. I had a Guild 12-string. I had to have that because Pete Seeger was teaching all of us how to perform as solo artists. You'd go to see him and it was like going to school. But all of a sudden, he turned everything into an "us," and I was really affected by that and wanted to do that. I don't even know what the model number of that Guild was, but it had a giant body and was a great guitar that I had for many years.

#### What are you playing these days?

I'm holding a 2002 Huss & Dalton custom MJC. One of the things about being a traveling acoustic music performer is you can go into the upscale guitar stores. And there's always the room with signs that say, "Please ask for assistance before you handle this instrument." There would be Collings and Bourgeois and Lowden and Martin and Taylor guitars, and I would play them all. They'd often have a Huss & Dalton. I'd never heard of them, but I thought they were always the best guitars [in the room]. They just suited me.

Finally, after running into these strange-named instruments for the fourth or fifth time, I said, "OK, where are these guys?" I discovered they were in Virginia like 25 minutes from my house. I went over there and had them build me an instrument. They had a beautifully figured sapele board there. I said, "Let's use that. I want a cutaway, I want this concert body, and you know I've never had a slot-head guitar. Why don't you make it a slot-head?"

So they made this instrument, which is the best guitar I've ever played, bar none. It's got a really thin neck and a Sitka spruce top. They set it up beautifully and they built-in L.R. Baggs' Dual Source system, which makes it sound great through a PA. It's almost the only guitar I've played on a big stage with the monitors cranked up and it *never* feeds back. I see other players that have to put a damper in the soundhole and

I don't like to do that—it just looks weird. And with this guitar, I don't have to.

#### So the slot-head became your main guitar?

And then I broke a string onstage. With a regular guitar, every guitar player has their little schtick that they do. They can talk to the audience or tell a joke while they're changing their string and *voila*, they're ready to go in less than a minute. With a slot-head guitar, you actually have to sit down and look for the [tuner shaft] hole—you need a longer story!

So I went back to the shop and said, "Did you guys know about tricky string changes with a slot-head guitar?" And they said, "Yeah." "Why didn't you tell me?" They said, "Well,

**'I don't have  
400 guitars,  
because I know  
the luthiers of  
every instrument  
I own. I know  
what they put  
into them!'**

—JOHN MCCUTCHEON

because then you wouldn't be coming here to order a copy of that guitar without a slot-head." Which is exactly what I had gone there to do [laughs]! So I actually have three of their guitars, including a rosewood dreadnought, which is my go-to recording guitar. My engineer absolutely loves it.

#### Any other special guitars in your collection?

I have a Clint [O.C.] Bear copy of a Gibson Nick Lucas and I have a 1914 Gibson L-1, which I got because I was doing a one-man play about Joe Hill and the last day of his life, in 1915. I wanted a period guitar and I found this. As many of your guitar nerds will know, it's the first steel-string that Gibson made. The neck is a club—unplayable by modern standards. So I sent it out to my late, dear friend Paul Hostetter, out in Santa Cruz, California. And he just worked down the neck and set it up and put a pickup in it so I

could use it onstage. It came back as a wonderful guitar, with a bit of a small sound compared to a modern instrument.

#### Is the dreadnought a cutaway?

No, no. I think if I showed up with a dreadnought cutaway, I would be drummed out of the International Bluegrass Music Association [laughs]. It is a regular, good, honest Clarence White guitar. It has a very different sound, plays really differently than my more fingerstyle guitars.

And those are all the guitars I have. I'm not Steve Earle—I don't have 400 guitars, because I know the luthiers of every instrument I own. I know what they put into them. And if I have an instrument—banjo, guitar, fiddle, whatever—and it sits in the closet unplayed for longer than a year, it feels like a violation of some kind of ethics. This is an instrument that was made to be played and deserves to be out being played by people. So those are my four guitars—well, five with the L-1.

#### How do you record your guitars?

I record them in stereo. I use a Neumann TLM 49 paired with a KM 184 placed towards the 12th fret and just below the bridge, respectively.

#### How do you get your sound onstage?

Years ago, when I started playing festivals, I realized I was every sound person's nightmare. I would show up with five different instruments, some of which they'd never seen before. And at the bigger festivals, the people doing the sound don't do sound for very many folk music venues, right?

So we experimented with lots of different stuff and eventually settled on the L.R. Baggs Dual Source. I have bogarted lots of copies of that now extinct pickup—they call it something else now. It combines an undersaddle piezo with an internal mic that's blended. I just love the trueness of the sound.

My stage setup includes an Audio Sprockets ToneDexter [see review in the August 2018 issue]. It's a really remarkable thing: You plug in your pickup and then you plug in your favorite microphone. And it goes through a testing and altering process that [digitally] changes the wave structure of the pickups to match the sound of the microphone. So it kind of takes out that nasal piezo sound.

From there, I go to a small mixing board with an insert for the real magic piece of my setup: an old Boss VF-1 multi-effects processor. It lets me set the right sound when I switch an instrument. I'm also using a Peterson StroboStromp, which is a combination of a tuner, mute, and active DI. It has worked really well. And you know, what's the point of practicing if you can't deliver the sounds? **AC**





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Grant Gordy





# TEAM PLAYER

## Improviser Grant Gordy thrives in the string-band ensemble setting of his latest work

BY ADAM PERLMUTTER

**I**n March of last year, the jazz community was shocked and saddened to learn of the death of trumpeter, cornetist, and composer Ron Miles, who was just 58, from a rare form of blood cancer. Miles, with his warm and understated approach to both improvisation and composition, had only just begun to enjoy a well-earned place in the limelight after decades of admiration from fellow master musicians, among them Bill Frisell.

Grant Gordy is among the many other improvisers who have been deeply inspired by Miles. In fact, Gordy was so taken with the trumpeter's last studio album, 2020's *Rainbow Sign*, that he used it as a sort of template for the compositions on his own new record, *Peripheral Visions*. This kind of borrowing might be common in music, but what makes it unusual in this instance is that Gordy has used Miles' concepts in a setting associated more with bluegrass than jazz—a string quartet with violinist Alex Hargreaves, mandolinist Dominick Leslie, and bassist Aidan O'Donnell.

Gordy, who is 40, is one of the most respected flatpickers of his generation, not to mention a bright presence in American acoustic music in general. Since his 2010 self-titled debut album, he has used bluegrass as a foundation while stretching out far beyond the genre's confines to find his voice as an improviser, composer, and arranger. At the same time, he has lent his distinctive picking to ensemble work with contemporary acoustic heavyweights like mandolinist David Grisman, banjoist Tony Trischka, and violinist Darol Anger.

Early last December, I called Gordy at his home in Brooklyn, New York, and we chatted about how he thinks about music, the serendipitous discoveries along his musical path, how Miles' work influenced the making of the new album, and the steel-string guitars that he finds feel most like home.

**You are a flatpicking guitarist, and your latest album, *Peripheral Visions*, has a distinctive chamber jazz influence. How would you describe your musical identity, and how did you get to where you are as a player?**

I consider myself very much like a folk guitar player—or, more precisely, an American guitar player. My dad's a guitarist, and, growing up in Portland, Oregon, I listened to a lot of bluegrass. So I got those sounds—Tony [Rice] and Doc [Watson] in my ears pretty early on. Once I became interested in music as a practitioner, I started to dissect a little bit of what was going on with bluegrass, and of course I went through the normal rock and jam-band phase.

At a certain point I became really interested in improvising. And that was a big plus of getting into that kind of jammy stuff; it opened me up to the possibilities of being an improviser in ways that were really important. Pretty early on I also discovered David Grisman's music—with all this interesting soloing, chord changes that I didn't understand, and challenging time signatures—along with players like Mike Marshall and Darol Anger.

It became clear as I investigated the music that those players were standing on the shoulders of all

these other great musicians and synthesizing a lot of different things. And so I started to learn about the sources they were drawing from: Wes Montgomery and Django, Eric Dolphy and Coltrane, and all those great jazz musicians that I came to revere so much. It all began to feel like a part of American music.

**How did you figure out the more inscrutable aspects of music by Grisman and others?**

I just sat there and worked my way through it. The story of my study of music is spending a lot of time with a small concept for a while. I remember when I was a kid in elementary school, I would sit at my desk with my little Discman. I would listen to something like Led Zeppelin's "When the Levee Breaks," which starts with that cool drum beat, and figure out how to tap out its syncopated rhythm with just my hands on the desk.

**Talk about some of the other small concepts you discovered.**

There's this Darol Anger tune, "Key Signator," that the Grisman Quintet played that I was so obsessed with. It's in C minor; you're starting with a C minor chord, then it goes to a D minor ninth. At least that's what Tony Rice plays. And of course the ninth of Dm9 [E] is the major third of C, so you're creating this really interesting tension where you're kind of modulating inside the chord progression.

That really struck me, and I started recognizing it in a bunch of other places—for instance, you can hear Herbie Hancock doing different versions of this same harmonic move. So my process is just taking one little seed of information and watching it bear fruit in many other contexts, whether in terms of arranging or composing.

I really like that approach, and I think it can apply to any kind of music—especially in a string band setting where we're trying to keep things conversational, and not too nailed-down in any way. There is a beauty to the engine that is a bluegrass band, where everybody's got a role—although what I play isn't really bluegrass, at least not in the traditional sense.

**How did you first come to work with Grisman?**

He was doing a camp for a number of years called the Mandolin Symposium, which I attended. I met him there when I was already a huge devotee of his music. After the camp ended, David invited me to come have dinner at his place, and it was amazing to get to hang with this guy who was my hero.

I was living in Colorado at the time, and when he would come play with the bands, I would go and sit in. He became aware of my



JACOB BUCKENSTAFF

**'There is a beauty to the engine that is a bluegrass band, where everybody's got a role' —GRANT GORDY**

playing and that I was really invested in his music. Eventually Frank Vignola became his guitarist. And when Frank couldn't make a date, David asked me to sub—little did I know that was actually my audition.

**What are some of the most important things that you have taken away from playing with Grisman?**

In thinking about what he did for this wing of instrumental, string-based American music—whatever you want to call it—he helped create a whole world of music. And being aware of that really gave me permission to think, "Well I can write tunes also and synthesize the kind of sounds that I like and turn them into my own vehicles." He is such an inspiration for just cultivating one's own aesthetic and one's own sound.

It's interesting, because early on David was a huge Bill Monroe nut—if you listen to his

really early recordings, you can really hear how much he sounded like Monroe. At some point he realized, "Well I've got to do my own thing and kind of make my own style." And he ended up being one of the most instantly recognizable mandolin players you could ever hear. So the biggest thing I took from David is just to do your own thing.

**After many years of living in the West, you moved to New York almost ten years ago.**

**What has that meant for you and your music?**

Just the other night I did a gig at Barbès [a bar and performance space in Brooklyn]. I was playing electric guitar in the back room with a great steel-guitar player, two horn players, an electric bassist, and a drummer—a really cool ensemble. And in the front room near the bar there was a choro session going on, a big hang right there. It was one of those only-in-New-York moments where I'm on my way to my gig and I need to squeeze by the cavaquinho player.

But there's just so much inspiration all the time in New York. There are so many great players that it can't help but influence what I do or how I see the music and art. It still feels new to be here, and I think it's really spurred a



lot of growth for me. Also, I just really love living here; it's definitely the happiest I've ever been with the place that I lived in. I think that counts for a lot.

#### What's your main guitar these days?

It's my 2019 Hiroshi Suda, which I love. It's a totally beautiful guitar, and I played it exclusively on the new record. I've known Hiroshi for years now. I met him at IBMA [the International Bluegrass Music Association trade show]—he does a booth there—and one year he gifted me a dreadnought. I was shocked, as you might imagine. But at the time, I was really phasing out of dreadnoughts and into the realm of smaller-bodied guitars. I felt terrible that I wasn't playing this guitar, and a little while later Hiroshi emailed out of the blue to say that he was building me a triple-0 because it was clear that I was only playing my Martin.

#### Being a flatpicker, why did you move away from dreadnoughts?

Dreadnoughts are funny for me because, well, number one, they're so large and I'm not that big. And sonically, I really like the kind of warm midrange [characteristic of smaller guitars]—that's where I want to live. And I feel like for me, dreadnoughts can get this really woofy low end and a sharp high end. I really just prefer to highlight everything in between those two sounds.

All this came about because years ago, I did a gig with Grisman's band where my dreadnought's bridge cracked, but fortunately we were in the Bay Area [where Grisman lived at the time —*ed.*], so David lent me a really old Martin 000-28, just a beautiful guitar. I played it on that gig and I remember thinking, "Oh, this is my sound." It just felt right, rather than me trying to conform to a dreadnought. And as soon as I started playing the Suda, it was like, "Yep, sounds like me!"

#### How does the Suda compare to the Martin?

The Martin is a 1944 000-18 and it has its own character and voice. There's a certain part of the color spectrum it occupies, and you can hear it very clearly on the first Mr. Sun [a quartet led by Darol Anger —*ed.*] record, *The People Need Light*. That guitar is a little harder to play—you have to wrangle it a bit more.

The Suda feels more like an appendage rather than something my appendages are holding, and it's just got a clarity to it. The Martin has a little more punch on the high end and the Suda gives you all that midrange. Plus, it's cool that you don't have to worry about it since it's a newer guitar. You're obviously going to be a lot more careful with something like a 1944 Martin.

#### Talk about the inspiration behind *Peripheral Vision*.

This one had a specific record that influenced me more than anything else. Every once in a while, you hear something that just really strikes you and hits you over the head. And I had that experience with the last Ron Miles record, *Rainbow Sign*.

I just got so deep into it. There's something so special about the way that particular ensemble plays together and the way Ron would write, his ability to create this almost mystifying combination of going from improvising into a written part or vice versa—just the most brilliant ensemble playing.

During the couple of months leading up to making the record, I was really pushing myself to write a lot and get everything ready. And I just kept thinking about the approach they

took on *Rainbow Sign*. Obviously it's not possible that a four-piece string band is going to sound anything like this other music, but there's something about that aesthetic and the warmth of that music and the openness of it and the breadth that is so striking, so I wanted to capture some of that feeling.

Before we went into the first session, I took a little writing retreat in the country for a few days to keep working on stuff. While I was there, I emailed the other three guys—Dom and Alex and Aidan—and implored them to listen to that record.

#### Were you acquainted with Miles?

When I was living in Colorado a decade and more ago, I had a lot of young musician friends who were mentored by Ron in the local jazz and jazz-adjacent community. I always knew that he



### WHAT HE PLAYS

For many years, Grant Gordy's main instrument was a 1944 Martin 000-18. In addition, he's now playing an interpretation of this classic guitar made by the Japanese luthier Hiroshi Suda. Like the Martin, the Suda 000 features an Adirondack spruce top and Honduran mahogany back and sides, but the neck is outfitted with a nonadjustable carbon rod, rather than ebony. Gordy has generally moved away from dreadnoughts, but he also has a 1998 Collings D1. He strings all three guitars with D'Addario EJ17s and prefers 1.55mm D'Andrea Pro Plec picks.

For live gigs, Gordy prefers to play through a microphone, but when he needs to plug in he uses a K&K Pure Mini pickup and Grace Design BiX acoustic preamp pedal. As for electric situations, he uses his Hofner Jazzica archtop through a Henriksen Blu SIX combo amplifier. —AP

was a musical force, and though he was warm and gracious, I kept a reverential distance, to some regret. We talked about getting together a couple times, but I never pushed too hard on it, and then I moved away to New York. I was a huge fan of *Heaven*, his duet record with Bill Frisell, and, getting further from Colorado, I started to dig more deeply into his discography and become more and more enamored with his playing, composing, and overall style.

When the Village Vanguard reopened here in New York in September of 2021 after the Covid shutdown, the first show they presented was Ron's quintet, playing the music from *Rainbow Sign*. It was Ron's first time headlining at the Vanguard, and it was a revelation to me. I was deeply moved to see that music performed live by that incredible ensemble. The next day I

texted Ron to tell him how much the concert meant to me, and he responded so kindly, telling me to get in touch next time I was back in Colorado so he could come hear me. Tragically, he left this world just six months later.

**What an incredible loss. How did Miles' ways as an improviser inform your approach to single-note soloing on the new record?**

You know how certain soloists just strike you a certain way? Ron is one of those people to me, like Miles Davis or Peter Bernstein or Darol Anger, who just play with such conviction, where everything they improvise sounds like a melody being created on the spot. Who can explain the mystery of that? I don't think I can play like that, but that's what I'm striving for as an improviser. I like to think that our music falls somewhere in between ourselves and

those ideal examples that we reach towards, and that space between becomes our style.

**How has your music evolved over the last 14 years since your debut album?**

For one thing, I didn't have any charts for the first record—everybody just had to learn everything by ear and then play it. I'm not a good reader, so that approach makes a lot of sense to me. But this time around there was a little less time; everybody had a lot on their plates. I thought, "Well, I should probably make charts for everything."

I feel like I'm much more comfortable now with my role in an ensemble. I don't think I'm ever going to be the flashiest flatpicker; I don't have those kinds of chops and I'm not particularly interested in that. But I do like being part of a group, and to think about what the overall sound is going to be like.

For example, there's a tune on the new record called "The Mobius," which I really labored over. I wanted it to feel like you couldn't tell what time signature it was in or when things were beginning and ending. It's basically just one 12- or 24-bar melody that repeats over and over again, almost like [Miles Davis'] "Nefertiti."

It's all about expressing the melody in a way where everybody's supporting it without necessarily stating it at the same time. So that was a pretty fun thing to experiment with. This kind of carries over from my first record too, because even though I'm the bandleader, that doesn't mean I need to play all the melodies or take the first solo. It's just being thoughtful about arranging and how things are going to work out in the narrative arc of a piece. All that stuff feels pretty important because it's instrumental music, so I want it to be narratively interesting.

**Why do you prefer an ensemble setting?**

I think on one hand it's just a place that I feel comfortable. It feels good to be a rhythm guitarist; I like to comp. It's like surfing—not that I've ever surfed—but you're riding these dynamic waves. And as a writer, I like working with all these different sounds that can be used to play the melody; for instance, realizing that a tune could sound great if simultaneously played by pizzicato bass and pizzicato violin. Those kinds of possibilities are obviously only available in an ensemble setting. It's like this playground where you get to experiment with so many textural possibilities. And then of course in the moment of actual execution, you get to let everyone's instincts, and the relationships that you have with these other members of the ensemble, come together. You need a group of people to do that, and it's just magical. It's the most beautiful version of community you can experience.

AC



## A LOVING TRIBUTE

*Grant Gordy opens his piece "To Ron," in honor of the late Ron Miles, with a beautiful unaccompanied solo based on a series of striking and unusual harmonies. The intro is transcribed in its entirety on the opposite page. —AP*

"My intro to 'To Ron' was completely improvised," says Gordy. "The composition itself was one of those whose writing and arranging stayed in process right up until we tracked it, and I realized I didn't really have a satisfactory beginning to the tune. The guitar-and-mandolin unison melody felt too abrupt to start with, so I thought I'd just try improvising a solo cadenza, based loosely on the first two notes of the melody and some of the harmonic content of the piece, to open it up. It's sort of a ramble through some of the emotional themes of the piece, but there was no road map involved. I tried a few different takes of this opening solo, and the first take, with the least amount of conscious thought put to it, felt most appropriate to the tune."



Freely

Emaj7/D# A/C# E/B Amaj7 A<sup>6</sup> Emaj7/G#

Badd4/G Badd4/F# F#add4 Asus2

A13alt D# N.C. Amaj7 Am(maj9)

C#7#9 C(#9) Emaj7/G# Emaj7#5 Dmaj9

C#m9 A G#m Gsus2 Db/F E6 Amaj13 To head

Eliot Fisk





# Ceaseless Questing

## Six decades into his musical journey, Eliot Fisk still seeks new summits

BY MARK SMALL

**D**uring a November 2022 interview at his New England Conservatory of Music teaching studio, classical guitar virtuoso Eliot Fisk turns momentarily wistful looking back over his long and storied career. “Years pass by and I think, ‘How can this be?’ I’m just getting started,” he says, voice rising. “I’m at the point where I’m looking at the last chapters of my life.”

In actuality, Fisk is quite youthful at 68, still possessing unflagging energy for music and life in general. His busy early chapters chronicle countless recitals worldwide, concerto appearances with top orchestras, more than 45 albums (and others in the wings), numerous premieres of works dedicated to him by top composers, a huge pile of his transcriptions of non-guitar music from five centuries, and a peerless legacy as a teacher. It’s not going out on a limb to predict that future achievements still await him.

Fisk’s hunger for music and precocity in guitar technique were apparent early on. Bill Viola, an IBM engineer who loved Andrés Segovia’s playing, gave Fisk his first formal lessons in Philadelphia when he was 12. That ended two years later when the Fisks moved to Syracuse, New York. The young guitarist continued teaching himself and later undertook summer studies with well-known classical guitarists of the time Oscar Ghiglia and Alirio Diaz in Siena, Italy. In 1973, Rose Augustine, the widow of Albert Augustine (nylon-string pioneer and founder of Augustine Strings),

facilitated a providential meeting between Fisk and Segovia. Impressed with Fisk’s playing, the maestro thereafter made time in his schedule whenever in New York to mentor and encourage him. (Visit [eliotfisk.com](http://eliotfisk.com) to view Segovia’s handwritten letters of recommendation for Fisk.)

Fisk enrolled at Yale University before Yale School of Music offered guitar instruction. Fortuitously, though, Yale entrusted renowned musicologist and harpsichordist Ralph Kirkpatrick with Fisk’s tutelage. After earning both his bachelor’s and master’s degrees from Yale, Fisk established the school’s guitar department.

### ADVENTURE SEEKER

Fisk soon embarked on a relentless performing career, gaining acclaim for his fiery playing, stage charisma, and ambitious programming. His concerts always feature very challenging music, not only J.S. Bach’s violin sonatas and partitas or cello and lute suites, but tour-de force-performances of the 12 Heitor Villa-Lobos etudes in one sitting, Benjamin Britten’s *Nocturnal*, or other epic pieces. Fisk thrives on going to the edge with his audience. Possessing missionary zeal, he shares his love for the poetic voice and musical possibilities of the classical guitar with listeners everywhere. Of course he’s played at innumerable concert halls and guitar festivals, but has also appeared in public schools, senior centers—even logging camps and prisons.

Fisk is lauded for his aptitude in new music, and such contemporary composers as Luciano Berio, Leonardo Balada, Robert Beaser, George Rochberg, Ralf Gawlick, and Nicholas Maw, among others, have written significant works for him.

"I've done ten world premieres in the last six months," he says, raising his eyebrows. "It's been totally crazy! Last spring, I was invited by Ian Krouse to UCLA for a residency with seven students from his advanced composition class who wrote duos for guitar and other instruments or voice. I did a lot of rewriting of the guitar parts and barely had them completed by the day of the concert. We had to put an hour and 15 minutes of music together in three rehearsals. Miraculously, everything went as well as it possibly could have. It was a wonderful, triumphant evening."

For the June 2022 Boston GuitarFest—an annual festival Fisk founded 17 years ago—the guitarist and the Cassatt String Quartet premiered *Toward the Light*, a three-movement quintet by composer Daniel Strong Godfrey. Fisk found the piece quite difficult and the composer very exacting. He had to rework and learn the guitar parts just days before the successful premiere. But he is accustomed to flying by the seat of his pants in such situations. Sitting in the audience, this writer couldn't imagine another guitarist who could rise to this task.

Given the guitar's built-in idiosyncrasies, many composers need Fisk's expertise. "I almost always recompose the guitar parts," he says. "The composer will write something and I will play it back and say, 'This is what I think it should be, what do you think?' They almost always take my suggestions."

Just prior to this interview, Fisk premiered a concerto by the guitarist-composer Giovanni Piacentini in Mexico City. Again, the guitar part needed help. "I wrote the cadenza in Mexico City," Fisk says, "and improvised two other cadenzas. We made changes up to the last minute."

Fisk embraces the entire canon of classical music and more—and not just what's playable on guitar. In conversation, he may lapse into lines in German from an aria in Bach's *St. Matthew Passion* or share insights on repertoire and composers from the Renaissance through the present day. "Music is an art that ennobles all of us," he says. "Schubert wrote the famous song 'An die Musik,' which is an address to the sacred art of music: *du holde Kunst*. The lyric says: 'You lovely art, in how many gray hours have you raised my spirit into higher realms.' Anything good about our species is all in the music, in the different languages of music and the ways people do music."



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## MUSIC AND SERVICE

Fisk is no stranger to accolades and awards, but feels strongly that music is not for self-aggrandizement. "It's time for guitarists to get away from the star system," he says emphatically. "This idea that you need to be a super-famous or rich musician traveling the world all the time is a bunch of crap. What matters is making good, honest art that touches people. That's what it's about. It's about service."

Fisk has invested much time and energy in service to young guitarists. For decades he has commuted between teaching posts at New England Conservatory and Mozarteum University Salzburg, in Austria, tutoring many brilliant international students at both institutions. He teaches in their native tongue—if it's one of the five languages in which he is fluent. Notable former students include Marco Tamayo and Joaquín Clerch (Cuba), Adam Levin (USA) and Scott Borg (Australia), Grisha Goryachev (Russia), and Ricardo Gallén (Spain), to name just a few.

Fisk is characteristically modest about those he has guided. "Joaquín Clerch and Marco Tamayo were accomplished virtuosos when they came to me," he says. "I think I was able to make a difference for them by expanding their cultural horizons. Coming from Cuba, they had

been locked off from the world. Grisha Goryachev played so well, what could I teach him about technique? There were things about classical music I showed him."

In addition to imparting musical knowledge, Fisk also instills a service ethic in his students, many of whom hold music faculty positions at various universities and conservatories. Adam Levin (profiled in the January/February 2022 issue) is among those who have embraced Fisk's philosophy about becoming a music activist. In addition to performing, teaching, and recording, Levin is a powerhouse organizer. With his cohorts in the Great Necks guitar trio, fellow Fisk alumnus Scott Borg and Matthew Rohde, Levin started the non-profit Kithara Project. With a mission to enrich the lives of disadvantaged youth through classical guitar, the Kithara team raised funds to build a school in Mexico City and has established three other facilities in America.

## LOOKING FORWARD

While pondering his retirement from his Salzburg position in about 18 months, Fisk and his wife, Zaira Meneses, also a guitar virtuoso, developed the idea for an arts enterprise that encompasses many aspects of Fisk's career: the





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Eliot Fisk Guitar Academy. He had no desire to bestow his name on the new venture and explains that the organization's acronym, EFGA, has a musical *raison d'être*. "Those letters are the bottom tetrachord of the Phrygian scale, which is our guitar scale," he explains. "It just worked out."

The site ([efgamusic.org](http://efgamusic.org)) describes offering "an extraordinary international, cross-disciplinary musical education with hands-on, live performance preparation for students of all ages and backgrounds to explore and develop their talents to the fullest."

Fisk says his wife is "on fire" for EFGA and taking the leading role in its development. EFGA offers online courses, some involving guitar, some more general, such as ear training and music theory. Fisk and Meneses aspire for EFGA to become international in scope and

"integrate the beauty and discipline of art and music into daily life" and address additional topics. Fisk adds, "We might have programs on philosophy, history of art, opera, and lots of things that can relate to the guitar. It's a universal instrument that permeates every aspect of life on the planet. The guitar is the hub, and the spokes of that wheel go out into all of human endeavor."

In 2023, EFGA will administrate both the Boston GuitarFest and Meneses' Latin American Music Festival. Future goals include hosting international festivals in Spain, Mexico, Austria, and California. Other ambitions involve commissioning new works from contemporary composers and sponsoring a variety of video and audio recording projects. "We have to create our own islands of beauty, lighting a bunch of candles," says Fisk. "We believe in this and want to create

a welcoming, worldwide community of people of good faith and goodwill."

#### OBSERVATIONS ALONG THE WAY

Fisk offers both kudos and caveats to the rising crop of young virtuosos. "Sound production in the right hand today is better than it ever was, but the art of the left hand has been lost," he opines. "Many in my generation started taking out vibrato and portamento and sought evenness, with every note sounding the same." Additionally, Fisk feels spontaneity and expression get lost when the ultimate objective becomes making zero mistakes. "Like anyone else, I want to make as few mistakes as possible, but I think I'll play better if I'm playing expressively," he says. "If you are just hoping to not make mistakes, I don't see how you take flight."

At a time when inexpensive subscription streaming services draw listeners' attention to individual tracks more than full albums, Fisk will continue to add complete albums to his catalog. He anticipates an early 2023 release of his recording of Bach's six cello suites. Later in

**'You go to places with music where the world ceases to exist and you are in a magical realm. That's why we are into music and the guitar.'**

—ELIOT FISK



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#### WHAT HE PLAYS

Eliot Fisk plays a 2010 Stephan Connor guitar (dubbed "Palladin") with a spruce top and maple back and sides. The scale is 650mm, and a removable extension under the top two strings makes the neck 24 frets, to facilitate playing artificial harmonics. Fisk uses Augustine Paragon Red strings (carbon trebles) and occasionally Paragon Blue (high tension) basses. —MS

the year he will record albums featuring the aforementioned Godfrey quintet, *Toward the Light*, and the Piacentini concerto.

More than half a century of dedication to his musical quest has only heightened Fisk's love of "the sacred art" and fuels his desire to continue the journey. "You can lose yourself in it and do what you really want—time travel or spiritual travel via music. You go to places with music where the world ceases to exist and you are in a magical realm. That's why we are into music and the guitar. I don't regret any of the hard work I put in. I have ideas for ten lifetimes, but all I've got left is a little bit of this one. I'm trying to make the most of it."

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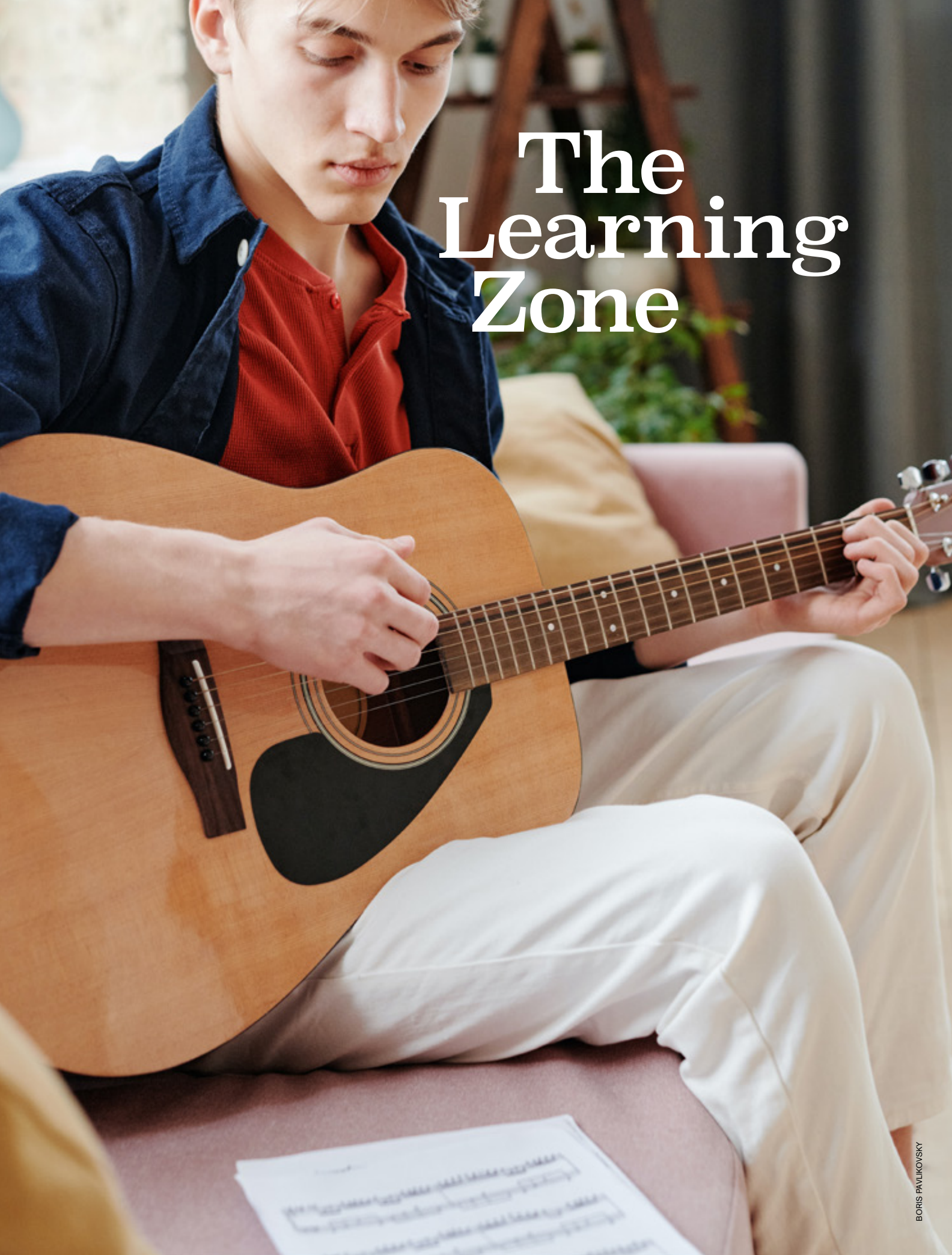
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# The Learning Zone







# 12 ways to stretch and challenge yourself on the guitar

BY JEFFREY PEPPER RODGERS

**I**t happens to all musicians, at any level of skill or experience: You hit a point where you're playing the same things every time you sit down with the guitar—a limited repertoire of songs, progressions, and patterns that are familiar and manageable. Over time you become less attentive and engaged with the music, and you start feeling like you're on a treadmill—going through the motions while looking at the same wall.

The musicians' path, for beginners and seasoned players alike, is all about continuing to move forward, learn, and grow. So how do you push yourself and regain the sense of momentum and progress?

I posed that question to a group of accomplished artists/educators, and here they share some of their favorite exercises, strategies, and tricks for helping their students—and themselves!—get beyond the comfort zone and discover new territory on the guitar. Head over to [AcousticGuitar.com](http://AcousticGuitar.com) for videos demonstrating many of these ideas.

## 1 CLEAN UP THE CHANGES

Especially in the early stages of learning guitar, one major challenge is making clean chord changes while staying in time. Playing a song, you might hit trouble spots where you don't get to the next shape fast enough, so you drop the rhythm for a moment while resetting the fingering.

Janet Feld, a Boston-based performer/teacher and staff instructor for the Passim School of Music, has long seen students hit this hurdle and offers three favorite exercises for getting over it—by forcing them out of their comfortable habit of stopping and starting.

"I help them to the other side with exercises that don't give them time to think about what they're doing. Before each one, I let them know it will likely feel like I'm making them practice their mistakes in a way that will piss off their inner Hermione," she says, referencing the high-achieving Harry Potter character.

Feld refers to her first exercise as strum torture, and she adapts it for different levels. For beginners, play a song you're learning extremely slowly and keep your strumming hand on the beat, even if you screw up the chords with your fretting hand. In her video demo, she uses the chords from "Amazing Grace" in the key of A, as in **Example 1**, played at the very leisurely tempo of around 30 bpm.

For more advanced guitarists, play through one section of a song several times, much faster than you are comfortable with—again, while maintaining the tempo even if you flub the fingerings. "After three or four rounds," she says, "play it a bit slower, and it generally feels easier."

Another exercise she recommends is to practice switching between the chords of a song with your eyes closed. This can help build trust that your fingers do, in fact, know where to go.

Finally, try the exercise she calls lift and drop. Take a short chord progression (in the video, she uses Em–C–D–G from Neil Young's "Heart of Gold"). Fret the first chord; lift your fingers off the strings while retaining the shape; change to the next chord shape without touching the strings; and then drop that new shape onto the strings. If you don't land the shape exactly right, adjust your fingers only *after* you drop onto the strings. And so on.



JANET FELD



LARRY BAIONE



STASH WYSLOUCH

## 2 PRACTICE SCALES

Often, guitarists get comfortable in one zone on the fretboard and want to explore more of the neck. Working with scales is a great way to do that, advises Larry Baione, jazz guitarist and emeritus chair of the guitar department at Berklee College of Music. “Learning scales helps us organize that ambiguous guitar fingerboard,” he says. “Anyone can easily see the C major scale on the piano, but it is a different story on the guitar.”

Baione developed and teaches a Berklee Online course called Scales 101. “I have seen great improvement in my students’ technique, sound, time-feel, and connection to the instrument,” he says. “Learning scales gives us practical fingerings for playing melodies. And playing melodies with less effort and less unnecessary movement gives us more control.”

There are many ways to practice scales on guitar, from staying in one position to moving along a single string. One very beneficial exercise, Baione says, is playing three-octave scales. In his video demo, he plays a G major scale from the G on the sixth string, third fret, all the way up to G on the first string, 15th fret, as shown in **Example 2**.

As you move up the neck, work on smoothly connecting the notes so you can’t hear the shifts from second to seventh to 12th position, as indicated in the notation. “Playing three-octave scales is a challenge at first,” he says, “but you will become more relaxed moving from one position to the next, and your coordination between your hands will improve.”

## 3 PRACTICE INTERVALS

Stash Wyslouch, a progressive bluegrass player and teacher of flatpicking styles, suggests another way to work with scales: by focusing on a specific interval.

Take, for instance, a B♭ major scale in third position. Instead of ascending and descending

the scale in steps, as in **Example 3a**, play each note and then the note a fifth above (or below, on the way down). So by scale degree, play 1–5, 2–6, 3–7, 4–1, 5–2, 6–3, and 7–4; descending, play 1–4, 7–3, 6–2, etc., as in **Example 3b**. This exercise, Wyslouch says, helps you get this interval under your fingers and into your ear.

Once you’re oriented with the intervals, try improvising melodies based primarily on them. “Go really slow and try to hear as the notes move,” he advises. “Push yourself not to just play the scale exercise but to move in different places with the new interval being the dominant ingredient.” **Example 3c** shows an excerpt from Wyslouch’s improvisation in his video demo.

“I always go back to this exercise,” he says, “and the more you develop as a musician, the more this exercise can develop with you.”

## 4 MOVE A MELODY AROUND THE FRETBOARD

One of my own favorite ways to explore new territory on the fretboard is playing a melody in different positions and keys—without a capo.

A simple melody works well for this purpose. In my video, I try it out with Stephen Foster’s “Oh! Susanna.” First, play the melody in as many octaves and locations as you can. In the key of C, the melody starts on the root (C), which can be found on the sixth string, eighth fret; fifth string, third fret; fourth string, tenth fret; third string, fifth fret; second string, first fret or 13th fret; and first string, eighth fret. In all these locations, work on creating fluid, vocal-like phrasing with hammer-ons, pull-offs, and slides, and add some bass notes and other supporting chord tones if you like.

Now transpose the melody into other keys. First go to the other most common guitar keys, G, A, E, and D, and again find the melody in different positions on the neck.

For extra challenge, give keys like F and B♭ a shot too.

Working with a melody like this is hugely helpful for developing the ability to play what you hear, and it’s bound to lead you to new fingerings.

## 5 FOLLOW THE FORM

Studying the melody and harmony of a great song can yield many fresh ideas (see *Here’s How* on creative covers, on page 38, for more). So, too, can mapping out the lyrics and form, points out guitarist/songwriter Adam Levy, creator of Guitar Tips Pro video lessons and contributor to the recent AG book *Play Guitar Like the Great Singer-Songwriters*.

“I often recommend a transcribing exercise for my songwriting students, but not the way we often think of it—i.e., writing down notes that someone else has played on a recording,” he says. “Instead, transcribe the lyrics to a song you’re intrigued by. Lyrics to many songs can easily be found online, of course, but doing the work yourself requires active listening and can help you get a better sense of the song’s architecture—wordplay, rhymes, meter, song form, and so on.”

With this transcription in hand, try writing an entirely new song using the same structure. “This helps you break out of writing in the same sorts of forms—a rut that rookie writers often fall into,” he says. “This exercise can also keep you from getting too hung up on finer details, like a particular word or melody note. Focusing on form gets you to zoom out a bit.”

## 6 RECAST A FAMILIAR SONG

Fingerstyle guitarist Al Petteway, author of many instruction books and videos, and Guitar Week coordinator at North Carolina’s Swannanoa Gathering, offers an interesting idea for playing around with a song: take a familiar major-key song and change it to a minor key.



**Example 1**

Example 1 shows a musical score in 3/4 time, key of A major. The score includes five guitar chord diagrams: A (x01230), D (xx0132), A (x01230), E (023100), and A (x01230). The notation features a treble clef and a key signature of two sharps (F# and C#). The guitar part is written in standard notation with a treble clef and a key signature of two sharps. The bass part is written in standard notation with a bass clef and a key signature of two sharps. The guitar part includes a 2nd position barre (2nd pos.) and a 7th position barre (7th pos.).

**Example 2**

Example 2 shows a musical score in 4/4 time, key of A major. The score includes a treble clef and a key signature of two sharps (F# and C#). The guitar part is written in standard notation with a treble clef and a key signature of two sharps. The bass part is written in standard notation with a bass clef and a key signature of two sharps. The guitar part includes a 2nd position barre (2nd pos.) and a 7th position barre (7th pos.).

**Example 3a**

Example 3a shows a musical score in 4/4 time, key of A major. The score includes a treble clef and a key signature of two sharps (F# and C#). The guitar part is written in standard notation with a treble clef and a key signature of two sharps. The bass part is written in standard notation with a bass clef and a key signature of two sharps. The guitar part includes a 2nd position barre (2nd pos.).

**Example 3b**

Example 3b shows a musical score in 4/4 time, key of A major. The score includes a treble clef and a key signature of two sharps (F# and C#). The guitar part is written in standard notation with a treble clef and a key signature of two sharps. The bass part is written in standard notation with a bass clef and a key signature of two sharps. The guitar part includes a 4th position barre (4th pos.).

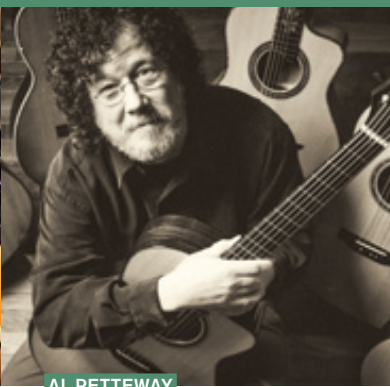
# The Learning Zone



JEFFREY PEPPER RODGERS



ADAM LEVY



AL PETTEWAY



DAVID HAMBURGER

In his video, he runs through the process with the traditional song “The Water Is Wide,” creating off-the-cuff versions in multiple keys and tunings. Initially tuned to DADGAD, he works out the melody in G major, adds bass notes, and fills out the sound with additional chord tones. Play his opening phrase in **Example 4a**, then check out the minor version in **Example 4b**—quite a dramatic change, and full of potential for development.

From there, Petteway continues to check out other possibilities for the song: playing in D major (**Example 4c**) and D minor (**Example 4d**) in DADGAD, and finally in standard tuning in several keys and positions.

You’re bound to make mistakes figuring out all these variations, and that is really the point. “My number one goal is to have fun playing the guitar,” he says. “Don’t worry about being perfect—just worry about stretching your imagination a little bit.”

## 7 TRANSCRIBE FROM ANOTHER INSTRUMENT

One surefire way to get out of the box on guitar is to take ideas and inspiration from different instruments. Play fiddle tunes, upright bass lines, piano chords, horn charts . . . whatever catches your ear. The beauty is that these parts are not defined by the mechanics of the guitar, so adapting them to guitar automatically pushes you into new territory.

Blues fingerpicker David Hamburger, author of *The Acoustic Guitar Method* and creator of the online learning site Fretboard Confidential, says he’s been finding all sorts of guitar inspiration from his latest musical endeavor: learning to play the drums.

“Taking up the drums feels a little ridiculous, but that’s what makes it exciting and fun, too,” he says. “It gives me a chance to be a beginner again, where every little discovery or achievement is a thrill. Most surpris-

ingly, learning the drums has given me new insight into what’s going on when I play fingerstyle blues. The interdependence it takes to play a basic groove with the kick drum, hi-hat, and snare is nothing but a metaphor for driving the bass with your thumb while coordinating licks and chords on top with your fingers.”

As a sample of the kind of fingerstyle idea he’s discovering thanks to drums, he shares **Example 5**. Rather than playing an alternating or steady bass, pick pairs of eighth notes on beats 1 (open fifth string) and 3 (open sixth string) with your thumb—the kind of pattern a drummer might do on the kick. On the backbeats (2 and 4), play chordal riffs up in fifth position—that’s your snare. The result is a fresh, funky sound quite different from standard fingerpicking.

In addition to discoveries like this, Hamburger says, “I’m now listening to even old familiar recordings with completely different priorities and hearing groove in a whole new way, which is giving me countless ideas for new things to try on the guitar.”

## 8 GO RANDOM

If your goal is to break out of familiar patterns, what better way than to follow no pattern at all?

Jazz guitar master Frank Vignola, prolific author of video courses on jazz technique and repertoire, suggest an exercise where you set a metronome and play random eighth notes—moving all over the fingerboard, crossing strings, and playing whatever pops up, without regard to scales or keys or any other logic. Just focus on the clarity of the notes, and be sure to stay in time. Check out his video for a sample of how this might sound.

“No preconceived thing,” he says. “Just keep playing! Try to make combinations you never do.”

## 9 GET LOST

Another fan of getting into the random zone is fingerstyle guitar soloist Vicki Genfan, creator of video lessons on acoustic guitar rhythm, tapping, open tunings, and more.

“My college classical guitar instructor gave some wonderful advice,” she says. “He told us to spend the first five minutes of any practice session playing things we’d *never* played before. It’s not as easy as it might sound. I’ve taken that suggestion and expanded on it over the past 30 years and have been sharing it with my students ever since. I call it rut-busting. Rut-busting helps us develop the ability to move away from the familiar and into uncharted places. It’s a great aid in coming up with new ideas or riffs for songs or arrangements.”

The rule of rut-busting is that there are no rules. “Pick up your instrument and allow yourself to explore it like you’ve never seen or touched it before, like you’re a child with a new toy,” Genfan says. “Any time you go back to a familiar pattern, chord, or riff—try finding a new way to move your hands. There are no wrong notes, no wrong sounds. Pure exploration, pure fun. This gets easier the more you do it. Start with a minute and extend the time as you are able. It’s really liberating!”

Using a less familiar alternate tuning is a great way to get into that exploratory space, she adds. That’s what she does in her video demo in open-G tuning, playing two minutes of free-form tapping, slapping, single-note lines, arpeggios, and driving grooves, by turns dissonant and softly melodic—and never predictable.

One last piece of advice from Genfan: “Have a recording device on. I promise you’ll be glad you did.”

## 10 BELIEVE THAT YOU CAN

Most of the above tips focus on physical obstacles on the instrument—breaking up patterns and finding new ways to traverse the fingerboard. Remember, too, that the



**Example 3c**

Musical notation for Example 3c. The top staff is in treble clef with a key signature of one flat (Bb) and a 4/4 time signature. The bottom staff is in bass clef. The notation includes a series of eighth and quarter notes in the treble staff and corresponding fret numbers (6, 3, 5, 3, 5, 7, 5, 7, 5, 3, 6, 5, 7, 5, 5, 6, 5, 3, 5, 7) in the bass staff.

**DADGAD tuning****Example 4a**

Musical notation for Example 4a, first system. The top staff is in treble clef with a key signature of one sharp (F#) and a 4/4 time signature. The bottom staff is in bass clef. Chords G and C6 are indicated above the staff. The notation includes a series of eighth and quarter notes in the treble staff and corresponding fret numbers (0, 0, 0, 4, 0, 4, 0, 4, 0, 3, 2, 0, 0, 0, 2, 0, 0, 4, 5, 0) in the bass staff.

Musical notation for Example 4a, second system. The top staff is in treble clef with a key signature of one sharp (F#) and a 4/4 time signature. The bottom staff is in bass clef. Chords Em11, C, and D5 are indicated above the staff. The notation includes a series of eighth and quarter notes in the treble staff and corresponding fret numbers (4, 0, 0, 4, 0, 0, 0, 0, 0, 2, 0, 3, 0, 0, 2, 3, 3, 0, 0) in the bass staff.

**Example 4b**

Musical notation for Example 4b, first system. The top staff is in treble clef with a key signature of one flat (Bb) and a 4/4 time signature. The bottom staff is in bass clef. Chords Gm(add9), Cm6, and G5 are indicated above the staff. The notation includes a series of eighth and quarter notes in the treble staff and corresponding fret numbers (0, 0, 0, 3, 0, 3, 0, 0, 0, 0, 0, 0, 1, 0, 1, 0, 0, 0, 0) in the bass staff.

Musical notation for Example 4b, second system. The top staff is in treble clef with a key signature of one flat (Bb) and a 4/4 time signature. The bottom staff is in bass clef. Chords Gm7/F, Ebmaj7#11, Cm6, and D5 are indicated above the staff. The notation includes a series of eighth and quarter notes in the treble staff and corresponding fret numbers (0, 0, 3, 0, 1, 0, 0, 0, 0, 0, 0, 0, 1, 3, 0, 0, 0, 0) in the bass staff.

# The Learning Zone



FRANK VIGNOLA



VICKI GENFAN



KAREN HOGG



MOLLY MILLER

learning process has many psychological aspects as well.

“A lot of what holds people back has nothing to do with music, but with self-talk,” notes Karen Hogg, a Connecticut-based teacher and author of method books for guitar and ukulele. “It’s hard to manage your own self-talk. I’ve seen so many times where people talk themselves out of stuff. They will say, ‘Oh, I can’t do this’ or ‘I can’t write songs’ or ‘I can’t improvise,’ and you know damn well that they can.”

Hogg has faced this kind of self-doubt herself as a vocalist. “I’ve been playing guitar since I was ten, so that’s so much a part of me, but the singing was definitely out of my comfort zone,” she says. “No matter how other people might perceive it, in my head I’m still like, I’m not a singer. But I’m learning to shift that.”

The key to getting past this barrier is just believing that you can, she says. “A lot of times, getting out of the comfort zone is more about dealing with your internal dialogue.”

## 11 PLAY FOR PEOPLE

Many guitarists are hesitant or resistant to performing, but playing in public is, no doubt, a powerful motivator for learning at any age or stage.

“If you’re up in front of people, it forces you to practice, because you don’t want to mess up,” Hogg says. “I try to put people in supportive environments. There are so many community-oriented events now for people at all levels—Make Music Day is a big one. In the past couple years I’ve had both adults and kids performing out in front of the music store where I teach. That’s something where you don’t have to feel, ‘Oh, I’m not a professional musician.’ It pushes people beyond their comfort level, and they see that they survive afterwards. Life goes on though even if there are mistakes.”

From open mics to song circles to guitar clubs, opportunities to play a few songs in a low-key environment can be found just about anywhere. These events give you not only the impetus to practice, but feedback that can help guide your learning agenda.

## 12 PLAY WITH SOMEONE NEW

Performing may also connect you with fellow musicians to play with—which is one of the most important and often underutilized things you can do to jump-start your learning, says Molly Miller, guitarist for Jason Mraz (and many others) and chair of the guitar department at Los Angeles College of Music.

“So often we only stay in our comfort zone—playing styles we know, with people we

know (or only ourselves), in a space we’ve been before, etc.,” she says. “I have found the thing that pushes me the most is playing with new musicians. I always get a little nervous. I practice. I think about what could I do with this person that is new. I always learn something from playing with someone else—whether that be a new song, a new groove, a new lick—or it just helps me get over my fears and insecurities.

“Call up a friend,” she advises. “Post something online. Find someone new to jam with—especially if it makes you a little nervous. That means you’re doing the right thing!”

## MOVING FORWARD

All of us want to be good at whatever we do on guitar—we want to play cleanly and confidently and expressively.

Continuing to get better on the instrument, though, depends on accepting and even embracing that when we challenge ourselves, we won’t necessarily hit the mark right away. We’ll make mistakes, stumble over a phrase or change, get a little frustrated. But from those awkward attempts will come new skills and new ideas that eventually, if we keep working at them, will fall within the comfort zone. Which means that it’s time to stretch and explore again.

See you out there on the trail.

AG

### Example 4c

Example 4c is a guitar riff in 4/4 time. The notation is as follows:

- Chords:** D, G, D5, D/C#
- Staff 1 (Treble Clef):**
  - D: A4, B4, C#5, D5
  - G: G4, A4, B4, C#5
  - D5: D5, E5, F#5, G5
  - D/C#: D4, E4, F#4, G4
- Staff 2 (Bass Clef):**
  - D: D2, A1, G2, F#2
  - G: G2, A2, B2, C#3
  - D5: D3, E3, F#3, G3
  - D/C#: D3, E3, F#3, G3
- Fingering (Staff 2):**
  - D: 0, 2, 4, 2
  - G: 2, 0, 4, 2
  - D5: 0, 0, 0, 0
  - D/C#: 0, 0, 4, 4







JOEY LUSTERMAN

# Creative Covers

**A songwriter's guide to arranging and performing other people's songs**

**BY JEFFREY PEPPER RODGERS**

**S**ongwriters often have a pretty fraught relationship with cover songs. On the one hand, you may feel justifiably proud of flying the flag of original music and developing your own body of work rather than focusing on covers. On the other hand, there's the sense that, in many gig situations, covers are exactly what you must deliver—and that if you do play your own songs, you risk losing your audience's attention and maybe the gig, too.

So do you stick to your guns and your own songs—or cave and just deliver the hits everyone can sing along with? As a lifelong songwriter who also performs other artists' music, particularly in an acoustic Grateful Dead project called Dead to the Core, I personally believe

that the choice doesn't have to be so stark. There's a healthier way to look at covers: as a creative vehicle that can actually enhance rather than compete with your songwriting.

Here are seven tips on how to develop a repertoire of covers that feel like your own.

## 1 COVER SONGS YOU LOVE

This seems obvious but bears repeating: Focus on covers that light you up—songs that you play for kicks, that pay tribute to your heroes, that you wish you'd written. If you're playing a cover only because it's popular and you feel obligated, your performance is bound to be flat. Songs you love, by contrast, will energize you—and your show.

## 2 PICK SONGS YOU WANT TO LEARN FROM

Use the process of working up covers as an opportunity to deepen your knowledge of songcraft. What exactly is the chord change that makes you swoon, and how does it function in the song's key? How does the chorus melody contrast with the verse? Where do the rhymes fall? Studying a song in this detailed way will help you not only create a strong cover but spark ideas to apply in other contexts.

So much of my ongoing education as a songwriter has come through picking apart classic songs to perform. While learning Paul Simon's "Still Crazy After All These Years," for instance, I recall marveling over the sly modulations in the bridge and final verse—and then trying out similar changes in my own songs.

## 3 APPROACH COVERS THROUGH YOUR STYLE

In an interview from the October 2011 issue of *AG*, Richard Thompson described studying other types of music to feed your songwriting. "It's kind of stealing, but it's not really stealing," he told me. "It's important to have your own style, first of all. Once you have your own style, you can import other things into it, and it starts to sound like you."

This is a great way to think about a cover, too: as importing someone else's song into your style. Playing a cover shouldn't feel like dressing up as another artist; it should be a chance to share another facet of who you are. For an example, look no further than Thompson's own rocking cover of Britney Spears' "Oops! . . . I Did it Again," in which he sounds unmistakably like RT.

## 4 DON'T FEEL YOU HAVE TO PLAY IT LIKE THE RECORD

Trying to recreate the sound of a classic track is fun and educational, no doubt. But for the kind of covers you can perform alongside your own songs, take a more flexible approach. Be open to changing the key to suit your voice. Experiment with the tempo, groove, or arrangement—or even change the genre completely—in search of the right fit for the way you play.

Specifically on guitar, don't be limited by the original track. You may find a fresh approach to the song in a different capo position, tuning, or picking style. I've arranged the Grateful Dead's "Cassidy" and Pink Floyd's "Wish You Were Here" (transcribed in the July/August 2021 issue) in *DADGAD*, for instance, and the tuning really unlocked those songs for me.



## 5 TAKE IDEAS FROM OTHER INSTRUMENTS

One of my favorite aspects of arranging a cover is adapting parts that are *not* played on guitar. Try incorporating lines from bass, keyboard, strings, horns, and other instruments. The process is bound to liven up your cover and stretch you on guitar.

A few years ago, I challenged myself to find a way to bring George Harrison's "Within You Without You" to life on guitar, incorporating something like the tambura drone and the melodic lines of the bowed dilruba. In my arrangement (see AG February 2018), I discovered an alternate tuning/partial capo setup that I've continued to explore. That cover was a real guitar breakthrough for me.

## 6 GET CLOSE TO IT, THEN GET AWAY FROM IT

When you're initially working on a cover, figure out as many details of the original as you can. To truly internalize the song, use your own ears

**Playing a cover shouldn't feel like dressing up as another artist; it should be a chance to share another facet of who you are.**

rather than relying on transcriptions/tab. But then, after you've gleaned all you can, put aside the original track, and let your cover evolve in your own hands and voice. You may depart from the original in some respects, but your cover will take on more of your own style—and be more akin to your original repertoire.

## 7 TAKE INSPIRATION FOR YOUR OWN WRITING

Got a cover with a bluesy groove that audiences love, one with a big chorus that's a great sing-along, or a harmony-rich ballad that never fails to connect? Aim to write songs with the qualities you admire in covers. In other words, use what you learn from others' songs as an impetus to write.

You might even go further and directly tip your hat to covers in your songs. My recent release "Hippie Hair (for the First Time)," for instance, is loaded with references to music I

grew up on, from the Dead to The Band, Eric Clapton, David Crosby, Doobie Brothers, Peter Dinklage, and more. The song is a hoot to play live, as audiences recognize the sources while responding to my hook and story line.

## AT THE GIG

If you mix originals and covers in a show at a more casual venue, the conventional wisdom is that you'll lose the audience's attention

with originals and gain it back with covers. But I have not found that necessarily to be the case.

A straight-up cover of a song that everyone's heard umpteen times may, in fact, make people tune right out. A creative cover, on the other hand, may reel them in, delivering just the right blend of familiarity and surprise. And the best of those covers will truly feel like your own—infused with your artistic personality just like your originals. **AG**



## GREAT COVERS UNCOVERED

When artists take a creative approach to a cover and put their own stylistic stamp on it, sometimes they wind up with a signature song. For inspiration, consider these examples: all the performers have deep catalogs of originals yet made an enduring personal statement with a cover. Listen to the playlist "Creative Covers" on Spotify.

- Jimi Hendrix, "All Along the Watchtower" (Bob Dylan)
- Crosby, Stills, Nash, and Young, "Woodstock" (Joni Mitchell)
- Judas Priest, "Diamonds and Rust" (Joan Baez)
- Jeff Buckley, "Hallelujah" (Leonard Cohen)
- José Feliciano, "Light My Fire" (Doors)
- James Taylor, "You've Got a Friend" (Carole King)
- Cowboy Junkies, "Sweet Jane" (Velvet Underground/Lou Reed)
- Toots and the Maytals, "Take Me Home, Country Roads" (John Denver)

# All About That Bass

**How to add low-end excitement to common strumming patterns**

BY CATHY FINK

## THE PROBLEM:

You're familiar with the basic boom-chuck strumming pattern and would like to know how to play it in different keys while making it sound more interesting.

## THE SOLUTION:

Learn how to use different kinds of bass lines to add variety to boom-chuck accompaniment in the keys of E and A major.

In a previous lesson, I introduced you to boom-chuck patterns in the key of C major. This time, I'll teach you how to play them in E and A, while adding some new approaches for bass movement—everything you need to turn your strumming up a notch.

### 1 START WITH SINGLE CHORDS

Let's begin in the guitar-friendly key of E major. For the E chord, there are two good options for the bass notes on beats 1 and 3: You can either go between the open sixth string and the B on string 5, fret 2, as shown in **Example 1a**, or between that low E and the E on string 4, fret 2 (**Example 1b**). The same goes for the A chord—move between the open A root and the open low E bass notes (**Example 2a**) or the A and the second-fret E (**Example 2b**).

As for the B7 chord, use your second finger to switch between the second-fret B and F# bass notes, while keeping the other notes in the chord held down with your first, third, and fourth fingers, as shown in **Example 3**. Make sure that you can play all these patterns confidently before moving on.

### 2 PUT IT ALL TOGETHER

When you are ready, try playing the E, A, and B7 chords together in a typical chord progression (**Example 4**). Take it nice and easy, and make sure to pick the bass notes such that they sound full and pronounced. To ensure



COURTESY OF CATHY FINK

good timing, remember to use a metronome set at a tempo that is comfortable to you.

The previous examples contained bass notes all based on roots and fifths, but you can make things more interesting by using non-chord tones. In **Example 5**, beginning in bar 2, the bass line travels up stepwise, from E to F# to G#, landing neatly on the root (A) of the A chord in the following measure. From measure 4, beat 3 to the first beat of the next bar, a neat chromatic (containing notes outside of the key) bass line—A–A#–B—is used to connect the A and B7 chords.

Speaking of chromatic, on guitar it's generally easiest to add this kind of motion between the E and A chords (**Example 6**) and A and B7 (**Example 7**). The second measure of each figure is comprised solely of bass notes that function as a transition between the two chords. These bass lines serve as a nice contrast to those that alternate between root and fifths.

### 3 PLAY IN A DIFFERENT KEY

Let's switch to A major for the last couple of figures. **Example 8** shows a typical approach using bass notes all within the key. Note that at the end of bar 4, I let go of the chord form and strum the open strings—a handy trick in general when it comes to switching chord shapes.

**Example 9** is similar but adds a chromatic bass run in bar 2 to connect the A and D chords and another in bar 6, bridging the E and A chords in the surrounding measures. Once you've got all of these moves under your fingers, try plugging them into some of your favorite songs—you can see me doing just that on the traditional song "New River Train" in the accompanying video.

Cathy Fink is a Grammy Award-winning multi-instrumentalist based in the Washington, D.C., area. She teaches bluegrass and Americana guitar and performs around the world with her partner, Marcy Marxer. [cathymarcy.com](http://cathymarcy.com)





## Example 7

Example 7 shows a musical exercise in A major, featuring a sequence of chords: A, B7, and E. The exercise is written for guitar, with a treble clef and a key signature of two sharps (F# and C#). The guitar part is shown in standard notation, with a bass line and a treble line. The bass line includes a sequence of notes: 0, 2, 0, 4, 0, 1, 2, 1, 2, 1, 2, 2, 0, 2, 0. The treble line includes a sequence of notes: 0, 2, 0, 2, 0, 2, 0, 2, 0, 2, 0, 2, 0, 2, 0. The exercise is divided into three measures, each corresponding to a chord: A (x02340), B7 (x21304), and E (023100).

## Example 8

Example 8 shows a musical exercise in A major, featuring a sequence of chords: A and D. The exercise is written for guitar, with a treble clef and a key signature of two sharps (F# and C#). The guitar part is shown in standard notation, with a bass line and a treble line. The bass line includes a sequence of notes: 0, 2, 0, 2, 0, 2, 0, 2, 0, 2, 0, 2, 0, 2, 0. The treble line includes a sequence of notes: 0, 2, 0, 2, 0, 2, 0, 2, 0, 2, 0, 2, 0, 2, 0. The exercise is divided into two measures, each corresponding to a chord: A (x02340) and D (xx0132).

Example 8 continues with a sequence of chords: E and A. The exercise is written for guitar, with a treble clef and a key signature of two sharps (F# and C#). The guitar part is shown in standard notation, with a bass line and a treble line. The bass line includes a sequence of notes: 0, 2, 0, 2, 0, 2, 0, 2, 0, 2, 0, 2, 0, 2, 0. The treble line includes a sequence of notes: 0, 2, 0, 2, 0, 2, 0, 2, 0, 2, 0, 2, 0, 2, 0. The exercise is divided into two measures, each corresponding to a chord: E (023100) and A (x02340).

## Example 9

Example 9 shows a musical exercise in A major, featuring a sequence of chords: A and D. The exercise is written for guitar, with a treble clef and a key signature of two sharps (F# and C#). The guitar part is shown in standard notation, with a bass line and a treble line. The bass line includes a sequence of notes: 0, 2, 0, 2, 0, 2, 0, 2, 0, 2, 0, 2, 0, 2, 0. The treble line includes a sequence of notes: 0, 2, 0, 2, 0, 2, 0, 2, 0, 2, 0, 2, 0, 2, 0. The exercise is divided into two measures, each corresponding to a chord: A (x02340) and D (xx0132).

Example 9 continues with a sequence of chords: E and A. The exercise is written for guitar, with a treble clef and a key signature of two sharps (F# and C#). The guitar part is shown in standard notation, with a bass line and a treble line. The bass line includes a sequence of notes: 0, 2, 0, 2, 0, 2, 0, 2, 0, 2, 0, 2, 0, 2, 0. The treble line includes a sequence of notes: 0, 2, 0, 2, 0, 2, 0, 2, 0, 2, 0, 2, 0, 2, 0. The exercise is divided into two measures, each corresponding to a chord: E (023100) and A (x02340).





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COURTESY OF DOUG YOUNG

# Percussive Fingerstyle

Use these slapping and strumming techniques to add driving backbeats to your arrangements

BY DOUG YOUNG

**T**hanks to Chuck Berry, the backbeat (the accented second and fourth beats in common time) is forever associated with rock 'n' roll. It has worked its way into almost all forms of popular music and can be a very effective way of adding some punch to an acoustic guitar part. By using simple percussive techniques, you can add a bit more groove to both accompaniment patterns and instrumentals.

Let's start with a basic exercise. In **Example 1**, play the open fifth string on beats 1 and 3 with your thumb. On beats 2 and 4, bring the tips of your picking hand's thumb and fingers down on strings 3–5. Instead of strumming across the strings, slap your fingers straight down toward the body of the guitar. If you land on the strings forcefully enough, they will slap against the neck, creating a snare drum–like sound. Spend some time playing this simple pattern with a metronome or drum machine until the technique feels comfortable.

**Example 2** adds a three-note A chord on beats 1 and 3. Play it fingerstyle, using your thumb, index, and middle fingers. As with Ex. 1, slap the strings with your fingers as they return to position to play the next chord. Once you're comfortable with this basic technique, try **Example 3**, which introduces a little syncopation. Slide from the fourth to the fifth fret, while keeping the backbeat steady. The combination of syncopation and backbeat creates a groove reminiscent of Steely Dan's "Josie."

The backbeat can help anchor more complex rhythms, like the syncopated Am–E groove in **Example 4**. This rhythm pattern is busy, but the percussive backbeat remains constant. The challenge is to pick the chords with your fingers while moving your hand up and down, perpendicular to the guitar, to create the percussive sounds on the backbeat. Take this example slowly, and focus on creating a solid, consistent backbeat.

## SUSTAINING OVER THE BACKBEAT

Part of the percussive effect in the previous examples comes from cutting off notes as you play the backbeat. But you may want to sustain a note over the beat, and there are several ways to do so. One is to use your thumb for the percussive sound while your fingers play sustained notes. In **Example 5**, bring your thumb into position to play the bass note on beat 3. As you land on the fifth string, you can add to the sound by simultaneously hitting the sixth string with the side of your thumb. This technique is useful when you want to sustain notes on strings 3 and 4 over the backbeat.

Another way to deal with notes that collide with a backbeat is to use the back of your fingernails, creating a sharp accent without damping the strings, as shown in **Example 6**. This strumming technique creates a different sound than the snare effect we've been using so far and is great for emphasizing the backbeat, as long as you use it only on the second and fourth beats.





## COMBINING PERCUSSIVE TECHNIQUES

For some tunes, a loud, consistent backbeat is perfect, but the effect can become annoying if overused. A softer, more subtle backbeat works well in many situations, and it can also be effective to omit the backbeat at times. In some cases, even a single percussive slap at just the right time can provide a sense of propulsion. Experiment with percussive sounds on either the second or fourth beats,

but not both, for a more laid-back feel. **Example 7** uses the thumb technique on beat 2 only; **Example 8** is similar, with a percussive thumb slap on beat 4.

Now it's time to put these techniques to work in a short solo guitar piece, "Back in the Groove" (**Example 9**). The groove from Ex. 3 serves as both an introduction and ending. The melody begins at measure 4, leading into a chord progression with a descending bass line.

Notice that the eighth-note melody is inserted between the rhythm pattern and that the backbeat drops out during the melodic sequence as well. I've combined each of the percussive techniques we've discussed in "Back in the Groove," sometimes switching approaches within the same measure. The choices I've made are comfortable to me, but other variations are possible, so experiment to discover what sounds and feels best to you. **AG**

**Example 1**

Am

**Example 2**

Am

**Example 3**

Am7

**Example 4**

Am

**Example 5**

Am7

**Example 6**

Am

**Example 7**

Am

Am/G

Fmaj7

**Example 8**

E

Am

Am/G

Fmaj7

E



## Example 9 "Back in the Groove"

Am7 E5 Am

6 Asus2/G F E Fmaj7 G

10 Am To Coda 1. E7#9 2. E7#9

14 Am E Am E Am D.S. al Coda (no repeat)

18 Coda E7#9 Am7

The musical score is written for acoustic guitar in standard notation. It consists of a single system with a treble and bass staff. The key signature has one sharp (F#), and the time signature is 4/4. The score is divided into measures by bar lines. Chord names are written above the staff: Am7, E5, Am, Asus2/G, F, E, Fmaj7, G, Am, E7#9, and Am7. The score includes various musical notations such as eighth notes, quarter notes, and chords. Fingering numbers (1-4) are written below the notes. The score is divided into sections by measure numbers 6, 10, 14, and 18. The final section is marked 'Coda' and 'D.S. al Coda (no repeat)'. The score ends with a double bar line.



A woman with long blonde hair is shown in profile, playing an acoustic guitar. The guitar has a light-colored body and a dark pickguard with a white floral pattern. The background is a blurred night scene with warm, out-of-focus lights. Another person is visible in the background, also playing a guitar.

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Timon Kaple



DEBBIE BRUBAKER

# Mastering the Subtleties

How to use timbre, dynamics, and time-feel to breathe life into your guitar arrangements

BY TIMON KAPLE

A friend of mine asked me recently if I thought it was possible for humans to run out of music. With genuine curiosity, they expressed concern that “everything’s already been done, so how are musicians not just copying one another at this point?” While I don’t subscribe to this notion, it’s helpful to remind ourselves of the aspects of sound that allow us to have a distinct musical voice that separates us from others.

Think of music as a spoken language. If we place it in the same category as, say, Spanish, English, Mandarin, or Finnish, it simply becomes a tool for us to express ourselves. Are we concerned that we will run out of ways to express ourselves when we speak, write, and tell stories? What makes us unique is often *how* we say something, not necessarily *what* we say.

With this lesson, I intend to temporarily shift your guitar-playing focus more to the *hows* than the *whats*. We spend a lot of time trying to find the right notes, or the best words for what we’re trying to say, but how we say something is what helps us leave our mark.

One way to think about this aspect of creating music concerns timbre, dynamics, and time-feel. They are three of the most significant components of the individual musical voice, right up there with the ever-elusive tone that we’re always chasing.

## TIMBRE

Timbre, or tone color, is a major factor in how we perceive differences between two sounds. Even if we’re hearing the same note at the same amplitude, the timbre of the sound is what helps us distinguish one from the other.

You can control and manipulate the timbral aspects of your fingerstyle guitar playing by attacking the strings with a thumb-pick, fingerpick, flesh, fingernail, or a combination thereof. When playing a melody and accompanying ourselves with chords or a bass line, it’s important to keep the melody sounding front and center, which helps the listener follow along and clearly track the melody as it unfolds.

One way to keep the melody in the spotlight is to use dark, round timbres in the accompaniment while creating a bit of contrast with a normal attack on the melody notes. Similarly, you can try to produce a brighter timbre when playing the melody notes by using a fingernail or fingerpicks. I prefer the sound of fingernails and flesh for the melody and thumb flesh for the bass, but that comes down to personal preference.

When playing **Example 1**, try different articulations for the melody notes while keeping the bass accompaniment nice and round (using the flesh of the right-hand thumb). For the melody, you could try using a fingerpick, fingernail, or the flesh of your fingertips. In the example, it is most comfortable for me to use my middle finger to pick the melody.

## DYNAMICS

Dynamics typically refers to how loud or soft a sound is. It’s helpful to think about dynamics as the intentional increasing and decreasing of volume over time within musical phrases or sections. The late Kelly Joe Phelps was a master of dynamics, which lent even more depth to his already masterful solo acoustic performances. [See a lesson on how to play like Phelps in the September 2017 issue. —ed.]

By being very intentional about how we use dynamics, we can spotlight certain musical moments, draw listeners in with a whisper, or become as raucous as our instruments can withstand. Whatever path you choose, the ways in which we use volume to express ourselves is just another way to breathe life into what we’re doing.

For this lesson, it’s most important to point out one obvious advantage of wrangling control of your dynamics: it also helps you keep your melody out front. In combination with your choice of timbre, dynamics can help you make that melody sing. By backing off the volume of your accompanying chords and lines and boosting the melody, there will be much less of a chance that you’ll lose your melody and listener as you go.

In **Example 2**, the fourth bar contains notes that are in the same range as the melody heard in the previous measures, but they’re not





actually part of the melody. When it comes to differentiating this portion from the melody, you can lower the volume (dynamics) of the whole measure. Alternatively, you can keep the bass notes as strong as the previous measures but pull back on the accompanying notes of the fill to keep them tucked in. Give both approaches a try here. Bear in mind that you can use different timbres to lessen the volume

or how much notes stand out, as discussed in the above section.

### TIME-FEEL AND STRETCHING TIME

Time-feel can refer to the ebb and flow, non-metronomic, human aspects of performing rhythms over time. While something can be labeled as swing or straight, the ways in which players knowingly or unknowingly

choose to perform rhythms and phrases within that framework refers to their unique time-feel.

Especially when it comes to playing as a solo acoustic musician, time-feel is quite handy. You can bend and stretch time, perform phrasing at tempo or in time, or choose moments of rubato without time.

With **Example 3**, experiment with the time-feel. Try playing it straight, then swung,

#### Example 1

#### Example 2

#### Example 3

anticipating some of the melody notes before the downbeats. When it comes to stretching time, try removing the tempo altogether. Consider playing fewer bass notes or slightly speeding up when the melody gets busier and slowing down when there's more space. With some extra space, some players take the opportunity to roll through the chord as they articulate the melody, even if the transcription doesn't call for it. There's no wrong way to do this, but the goal is to keep the melody intact and in the spotlight.

### THE NEIGHBOR'S CAT

The examples above are from my tune "The Neighbor's Cat." For this, I use a combination of a rounded timbre for the accompaniment and a brighter attack on the melody notes. I also attempt to play aspects of the melody with drastic variations in dynamics to help give it a little more character. At the end of the accompanying video, I provide a quick example of how shifting the time-feel can drastically alter the spirit of the tune.

It's best to experiment with all three components described above. As with the examples provided, it can be easier to work on these aspects of your playing when you choose one or a few chords and a simple melody to play over the top. In this way, your attention isn't divided by a complex chord progression or intricate melody when you're first trying to hone your skills in these areas. **AC**

*Timon Kaple is a writer and ethnomusicologist based in Massachusetts.*

Example 4: "The Neighbor's Cat"

Example 4: "The Neighbor's Cat" musical notation. The notation is presented in two staves. The top staff is a treble clef with a key signature of one sharp (F#). The bottom staff is a bass clef. The melody is written in the treble staff, and the accompaniment is written in the bass staff. The melody consists of four measures, each starting with a chord symbol: G, F#, D, and G. The accompaniment is written in the bass staff, showing fingerings and fret numbers. The first measure of the accompaniment has a 7 on the first string and a 10 on the third string. The second measure has a 7 on the first string and a 9 on the third string. The third measure has a 7 on the first string and a 5 on the third string. The fourth measure has a 3 on the first string and a 3 on the third string.

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5 **G7** **C7** **1. F** **A7**

9 **2. Am** **Dm**

13 **C#dim** **Dm**

17 **D7** **G** **F#**

21 **D7** **G** **G7** **C7** **F**

# Tone for Days

How rest strokes can improve your flatpicking technique—and your guitar sound

BY GREG RUBY

The rest stroke—similar to the fingerstyle approach used by classical guitarists—is a plectrum technique in which each downstroke lands on an adjacent string rather than passing over it. This action directs more energy into the sounding string, which can have notable improvements of volume and tone on an acoustic guitar.

I first encountered rest strokes in learning the music of the brilliant jazz guitarist Django Reinhardt, but the technique can be used in virtually any style using a plectrum. In this lesson, you'll progress from the basics to the more complex aspects of rest-stroke picking. Remember to practice slowly at first so that you notice the subtleties of the technique. Gradually increase the tempo, but never go faster than you can stay relaxed. Take your time and enjoy the fuller tone these exercises will extract from your guitar.

## WEEK ONE

The basics of rest-stroke technique are as follows: For passages with quarter notes or larger subdivisions, use only downstrokes. For eighths or smaller subdivisions with two or more notes on the same string, start with a downstroke and alternate with an upstroke. Regardless of where the phrase occurs in the rhythm, begin with a downstroke whenever you strike a new string.

Start this week without your guitar. Hold your pick with an open fist and apply just enough pressure to hold it in place. Thinking of your elbow as a fulcrum and your forearm and hand as a lever, stand up and let your picking arm hang relaxed by your side. Lift that arm at the elbow until it is perpendicular to your body, then let it relax and fall back to your side.

Now refine this movement on the guitar. To play **Example 1**, set your metronome to around 60 bpm and place your pick on string 6 at around a 70-degree angle. On beat 1, let your pick fall through the string and land on the fifth string. Keep it resting there, then, without lifting, repeat the same motion through the rest of the strings. When you fall



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through the first string, let your picking hand relax and hang in the air. Try the exercise descending as well.

In **Example 2**, double each open string, again using only downstrokes. Feel the weight of your hand falling through the string and resting on the adjacent one. If you are repeating that string, wait until the last possible moment before lifting it to strike the string again. Pay attention to the subtle difference of movement whether you are lifting or falling. Next, add the fretting hand, as shown in **Example 3**. Remember to accurately practice all these exercises with a metronome while paying close attention to relaxation, weight, and gravity.

## WEEK TWO

This week you'll start using upstrokes, bringing the pick away from the guitar. **Example 4** is an

eighth-note exercise in which you change strings after an upstroke. For the downstroke, always follow through and let the pick rest on the adjacent string, but for the upstroke, bring your pick up and away, momentarily hovering above the strings. **Example 5** outlines a C major triad, approaching each chord tone from a half step below. As indicated, use downstrokes on the beats and upstrokes on the ands (chord tones).

So far you've focused on single notes. Rest-stroke technique can also be an efficient way to make chordal accompaniment sound bigger and better. For **Example 6**, use downstrokes throughout. Play each bass note using a rest stroke; let your pick fall through the string, rest, and then strum the proceeding chord. This technique provides not just more volume but efficiency—you don't need to lift the pick before strumming the chords.



**WEEK 1**

**Example 1**

**Example 2**

Example 1: Treble clef staff shows a sequence of notes (G4, A4, B4, C5, B4, A4, G4) with a 'etc.' label. Bass clef staff shows fret numbers 0, 0, 0, 0.

Example 2: Treble clef staff shows a sequence of notes (G4, A4, B4, C5, B4, A4, G4) with a 'etc.' label. Bass clef staff shows fret numbers 0, 0, 0, 0, 0, 0, 0, 0.

**Example 3**

Example 3: Treble clef staff shows a sequence of notes (G4, A4, B4, C5, B4, A4, G4) with a 'etc.' label. Bass clef staff shows fret numbers 5, 6, 7, 8, 5, 6, 7, 8, 5, 6, 7, 8, 5, 6, 7, 8, 5, 6, 7, 8.

**WEEK 2**

**Example 4**

Example 4: Treble clef staff shows a sequence of notes (G4, A4, B4, C5, B4, A4, G4) with a 'etc.' label. Bass clef staff shows fret numbers 5, 6, 7, 8, 5, 6, 7, 8, 5, 6, 7, 8, 5, 6, 7, 8.

**Example 5**

**Example 6**

Example 5: Treble clef staff shows a sequence of notes (G4, A4, B4, C5, B4, A4, G4) with a 'etc.' label. Bass clef staff shows fret numbers 7, 8, 6, 7, 9, 10, 9, 10, 8, 9, 7, 8, 7, 8.

Example 6: Treble clef staff shows a sequence of notes (G4, A4, B4, C5, B4, A4, G4) with a 'etc.' label. Bass clef staff shows fret numbers 3, 0, 2, 3, 1, 1, 1, 2, 2.

Example 5: Treble clef staff shows a sequence of notes (G4, A4, B4, C5, B4, A4, G4) with a 'etc.' label. Bass clef staff shows fret numbers 7, 8, 6, 7, 9, 10, 9, 10, 8, 9, 7, 8, 7, 8.

Example 6: Treble clef staff shows a sequence of notes (G4, A4, B4, C5, B4, A4, G4) with a 'etc.' label. Bass clef staff shows fret numbers 3, 0, 2, 3, 1, 1, 1, 2, 2.



## Beginners' Tip #1

One way to get comfortable with holding a plectrum with an open fist is to place a small ball in your hand. This will remind you to keep your hand open.

## WEEK THREE

Now let's take things up a notch. The A7 arpeggio in **Example 7** varies between one and two notes per string. When there is one note per string, strike the note and let your pick rest on the string beneath. Then, let it fall through the string for the next note. If there are two notes per string, use a similar approach, but with down-up picking.

For eighth-note triplets, like those in **Example 8**, always start each string with a downstroke. Notice that in the first measure, the last note in each triplet is a downstroke, allowing you to fall into the first note of the subsequent triplet. But starting on beat 3 of the second measure, the last downstroke of each

## Beginners' Tip #2

Make sure your picking hand is free and not anchored to the top of the guitar. You can either float that hand above the strings or let one of your fingers slide across the pickguard to help guide your hand location.

triplet comes to rest two strings above the next string you want to strike. It might be helpful to practice this passage by watching your picking hand, until it feels intuitive to do the string skipping required here.

As I mentioned earlier, one of the main rules of rest-stroke technique is to use a down-stroke every time you change strings. This becomes increasingly more challenging when playing three notes per string. As shown in **Example 9**, use down-up-down picking for each three-note group. **Example 10** combines bass/chord rest strokes with eighth-note bass runs. In the last measure, down-up picking will allow you to seamlessly return to the bass note of the Em chord at the top of the repeat.

## WEEK FOUR

Rest strokes can also be useful when you need to emphasize the top note of a chord, such as in chord-melody playing. [See Ruby's Basics lessons on chord-melody in the Jan/Feb 2020 through Jan/Feb 2021 issues. —*ed.*] The G-major turnaround in **Example 11** places the melody notes on string 2. In the first measure, strum the three-note G chord and let the pick come to rest on string 1. Keeping the chord held down, pick the seventh-fret F# with an upstroke, followed by a downstroke on the eighth-fret G. Repeat the picking pattern for the rest of the example, giving the melody notes the fullest possible attack.

**Example 12** uses a cascade of downstrokes to articulate a series of triplets. Make sure you use the rest stroke on every note. Try the

## Beginners' Tip #3

**Keep your picking-hand wrist relaxed and at a slight angle. This will soften the attack and make for a sweeter tone.**

down-up-down pattern in **Example 13** over the C7b9-Fm progression. Notice how using the down-up-down pattern allows you to easily land on the downbeat of the Fm chord with a downstroke. Use a similar approach for **Example 14**, with picking patterns of up to four notes per string.

Once you have gotten the hang of rest-stroke technique through diligently practicing all of these exercises, try using it whenever you are playing with a pick, and enjoy the noticeable improvements to both your technique and tone. **AC**

*Greg Ruby is a guitarist based in New York. Learn more about his recordings, performances, and online teaching at [gregrubymusic.com](http://gregrubymusic.com).*

## Beginners' Tip #4

Try using picks with different thicknesses to find what works for you. I prefer a slightly heavier and thicker pick, as this allows me to hold it with less tension in my hand. If at first you find the pick slides around, try using double-sided tape to keep it in place.

## WEEK 3

### Example 7

### Example 8

The musical score for 'The Rose Tree' is presented in two systems. The first system features a treble clef and a key signature of one sharp (F#). The melody is written on a single staff, with lyrics 'The Rose Tree' and 'The Rose Tree' placed below the notes. The melody consists of a series of eighth and sixteenth notes, with some triplets indicated by a '3' over the notes. The second system features a bass clef and a key signature of one sharp (F#). The melody is written on a single staff, with lyrics 'The Rose Tree' and 'The Rose Tree' placed below the notes. The melody consists of a series of eighth and sixteenth notes, with some triplets indicated by a '3' over the notes.



### Example 9

Example 9 is a guitar exercise in G major, 4/4 time. The melody is written on a single staff. The fretboard diagram below shows the following fret numbers: 5, 7, 8, 7, 8, 10, 8, 9, 11, 7, 9, 10, 9, 10, 12, 6, 7, 9, 8, 7.

### Example 10

Example 10 is a guitar exercise in G major, 2/4 time. It features chords: Em, C9, B9. The fretboard diagram shows fret numbers: 0, 2, 2, 3, 3, 3, 2, 2, 2, 2, 2, 2, 2, 1, 1, 2, 3, 2, 0, 3, 2.

## WEEK 4

### Example 11

Example 11 is a guitar exercise in G major, 4/4 time. It features chords: G, G#dim7, Am, D13, G, G9, Cmaj7, Cm6. The fretboard diagram shows fret numbers: 8, 7, 8, 9, 7, 9, 10, 9, 10, 12, 10, 12, 10, 7, 10, 8, 10, 12, 10, 12, 12, 12, 13, 12, 11, 12, 10, 12, 10.

### Example 12

Example 12 is a guitar exercise in G major, 4/4 time. It features chords: N.C., E, A7. The fretboard diagram shows fret numbers: 0, 0, 0, 0, 0, 0, 0, 0, 0, 0, 2, 2, 2, 2, 2, 2, 1, 0, 0, 5, 7, 5, 7, 5, 5, 6, 8, 5.

### Example 13

Example 13 is a guitar exercise in G major, 4/4 time. It features chords: C7b9, Fm. The fretboard diagram shows fret numbers: 9, 8, 6, 9, 8, 6, 9, 6, 5, 8, 6, 5, 8.

### Example 14

Example 14 is a guitar exercise in G major, 4/4 time. The fretboard diagram shows fret numbers: 4, 3, 6, 5, 4, 3, 4, 5, 4, 3, 4.

## TAKE IT TO THE NEXT LEVEL

**Eddie Lang, the godfather of jazz guitar, used rest strokes to project his robust sound. This excerpt is inspired by his 1927 recording of “April Kisses.” Hold each chord down for all three beats to provide legato articulation. Notice that the grace notes in measures 3 and 4 are three strings away from the next note. Still use rest strokes there, but imagine you are immediately bouncing off the sixth string to cover the skip to the third string.**

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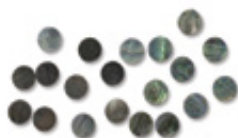
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# Willin'

Little Feat's trucking anthem in open-G tuning

BY ADAM PERLMUTTER

In the early 1970s, the Los Angeles band Little Feat, led by singer-songwriter and guitarist Lowell George (1945–1979), established a small but fervent following with its inventive mix of roots rock, blues, country, gospel, jazz, and other influences, not to mention artful lyrics and twisted song structures.

One of Little Feat's most enduring songs is "Willin'," which chronicles the hard life of a truck driver, with a particularly memorable chorus acknowledging the palliatives ("weed, whites, and wine") he uses to get by. The group first released the song on its 1971 self-titled debut album before recording an ultimately more successful version for 1972's *Sailin' Shoes*,

but the general listening public might be more familiar with Linda Ronstadt's cover on her hit 1974 album, *Heart Like a Wheel*.

The transcription here is based on Little Feat's original recording, a duet with George on vocals and acoustic guitar, heard more prominently than on the 1972 version, and Ry Cooder on bottleneck electric. It's played in open-G tuning (lowest string to highest: D G D G B D); note that the later version is in open G6, with the first string tuned to E rather than D. The four-bar strumming pattern first heard in the intro appears throughout the verses, interlude, and outro, so once you've learned it, you will know the bulk of the song.

Lowell George



JEAN LUC

This pattern shows a neat advantage of open tunings—most of the chord shapes require only two fingers, with the other notes played on the ringing open strings, and the G chord is situated entirely on the open strings. That makes for not only ease of fingering but compelling textural effects.

AG

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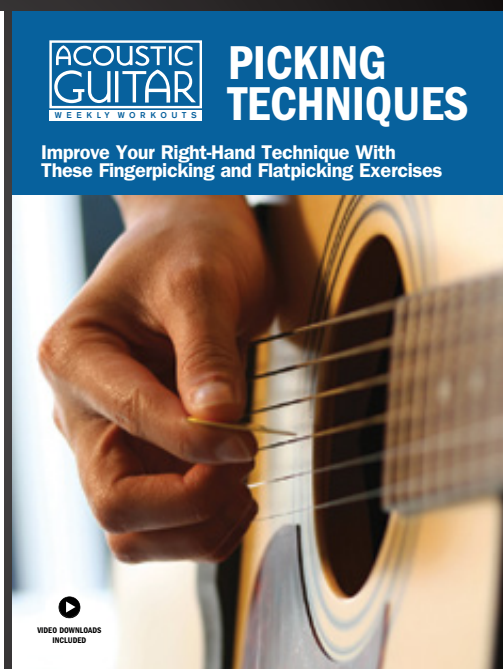
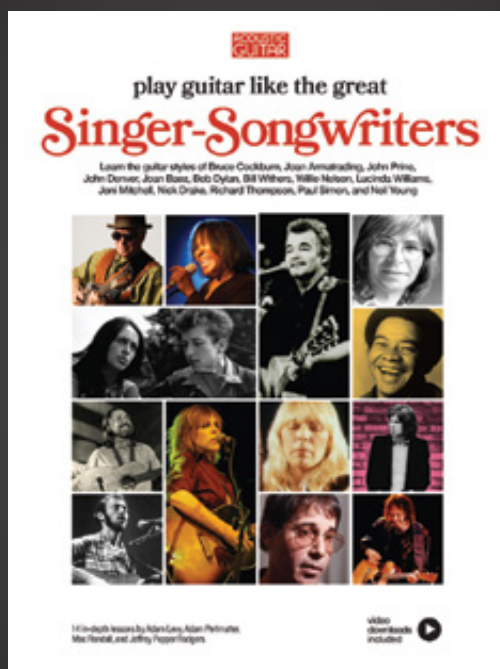
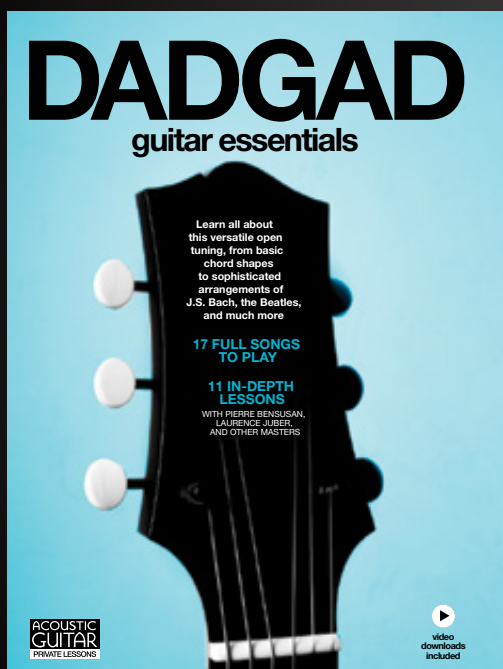
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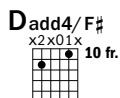
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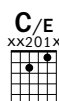
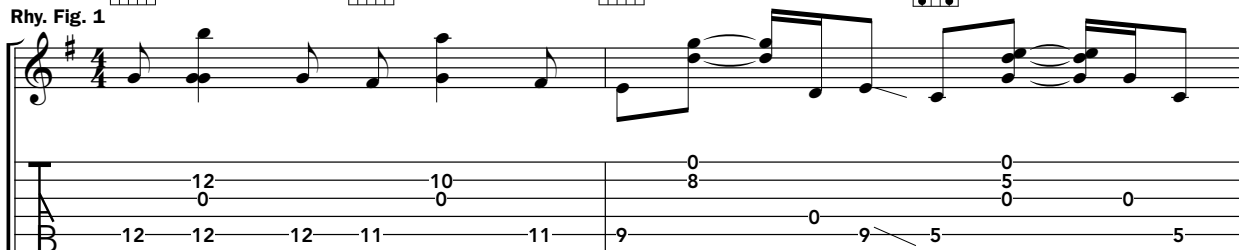


Tuning: D G D G B D

Intro ♩ = 82

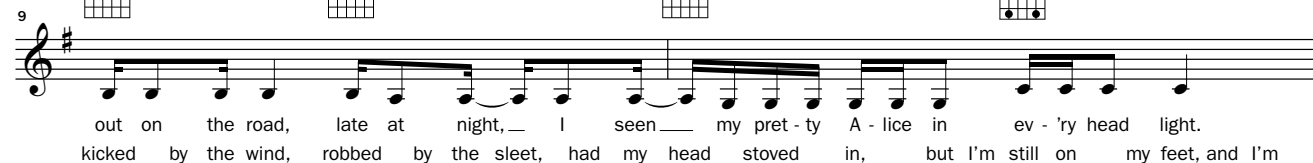
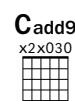
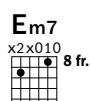
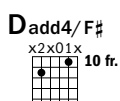
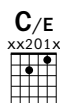
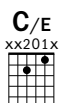
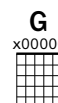
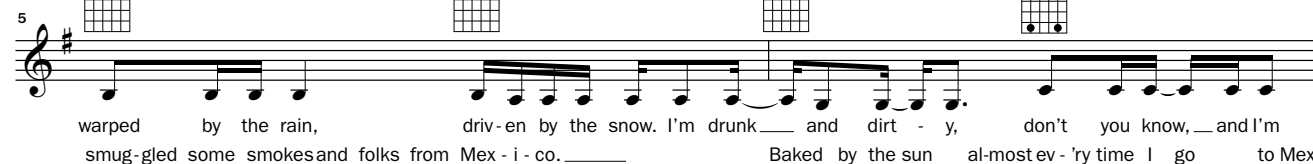
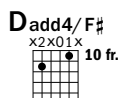
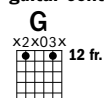


Rhy. Fig. 1



## Verse

guitar cont. simile





11

**G** x00000

**C/E** xx201x

**Dadd4/F#** xx201x

**C/E** xx201x

**G** x00000

A - lice, Dal - las A - lice. } I've been \_\_\_ from  
will - in', oh I'm will - in'. }

### Chorus

13

**C** x11111

**D** x11111 7 fr.

**G** x00000

Tuc - son to Tu - cum - car - i, \_\_\_\_\_ Te - ha - chap - i to To - na - pah. \_\_\_\_\_ Driv - en

15

**G/A** x2x00x

**G/B** x2x00x

**C** x11111

ev - 'ry kind of rig that's ev - er been made. \_\_\_\_\_ And I've driv - en the back roads so I won't \_\_\_\_\_ get

18

**D** x11111 7 fr.

**C** x2 03x

**G/B** x2x01x

**Am7** x2x01x

**G** x00000

weighed. \_\_\_\_\_ And if you give me weed, whites, and wine, \_\_\_\_\_ and you show me a

21

**D** x11111 7 fr.

**G** x00000

**C/E** xx201x

**Dadd4/F#** xx201x

**C/E** xx201x

sign, \_\_\_\_\_ I'll be will - in' to be

23

**1. Interlude**  
**G** x00000  
**Play Rhy. Fig. 1**

**2. G** x00000

mov - in'. 2. And I mov - in'.

### Outro

**Play Rhy. Fig. 1**  
(first three bars)

29

**G** x00000

**C/E** xx201x

**Dadd4/F#** xx201x

**C/E** xx201x

**G** xx000x

0 0 0 1 3 0 1 1 0  
0 / / / 0 0 0 x 0 0 0  
0 2 4 0 x 2 2 0

# No Reason

**A new Sunny War song built from a cool and distinctive riff**

**BY ADAM PERLMUTTER**

In a profile on Sunny War for this magazine (see September 2018 issue), editor at large Jeffrey Pepper Rodgers wrote about the resemblance of the singer-songwriter's idiosyncratic guitar approach to that of Malian musicians like the late Ali Farka Touré. Rodgers was surprised to hear that War was unaware of that tradition until some fans pointed it out to her and she searched for it on YouTube.

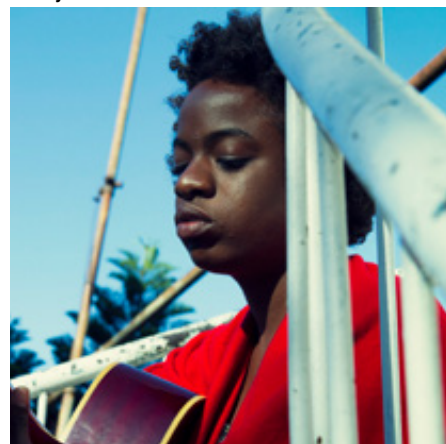
At the time, War was in the habit of busking at the colorful boardwalk in Venice, California, playing a 1989 Guild True American DC-1E NT she dubbed Big Baby. That cutaway dreadnought is still War's main guitar, and it—and

the West African tinge—can be heard to excellent effect on her recent single “No Reason.”

War plays “No Reason” in the key of G major, with a fourth-fret capo transposing it to B. The song is based on a curious riff that, with its pull-off ornaments and static harmony, has a non-Western vibe. At the same time, a steady root-fifth bass pattern connects the riff to the Travis picking tradition. These parts came to War from out of nowhere. “I was just noodling around and thought it sounded fun,” she says. “The riff lived in the voice memo app of my phone for a long time before I was ready to try putting words to it.”

To play the riff, fret the sixth-string G with your second finger, keeping it held down

Sunny War



FLORENCIA P. MARANO

throughout the G chord measures. For the double pull-offs on string 3, use your third and first fingers, respectively, to play the third- and second-fret notes. If you find yourself struggling to play the pull-offs cleanly, practice them on their own until each note sounds even and clear. **AC**

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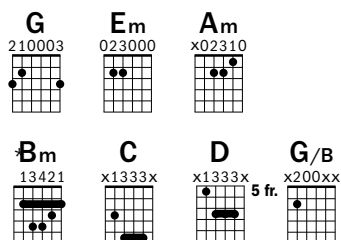
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Chords, Capo IV



Main Riff

1.

2.

etc.

Intro

G

Em

G

1. Good intentions that you keep

Em

G

Don't change the fact that you're a beast

Em

G

Better than most to say the least

Em

G

Imperfect man-made masterpiece

Chorus

Am Bm C

Cause you're an angel

G

You're a demon

Am Bm C D

Ain't got no rhyme

C G/B D

Ain't got no reason

Em

G

2. Don't know you well, but I can bet

Em

G

You did some things that you regret

Em

G

The ones you love most, you upset

Em

G

You haven't got forgiveness yet

Repeat Chorus

Em

G

3. Bust your back trying to behave

Em

G

To your best self you are a slave

Em

G

Can't sleep in the bed you made

Em

G

'Til you let go and finally cave

Repeat Chorus

Outro/Guitar Solo

||: Em | X | G | X :||

# Prelude No. 1 in C Major

Transforming a Bach keyboard work into a flatpicking guitar study

BY ALAN BARNOSKY

**P**relude No. 1 in C Major" from *The Well-Tempered Clavier, Book 1* is one of Johann Sebastian Bach's most famous compositions. This keyboard work fits nicely an octave lower on guitar, in open position, with only a few minor modifications—several of the bass notes need to be played in the original octave, as they would be too low for standard tuning.

While Bach pieces are commonly adapted for classical and fingerstyle guitar, the same cannot be said when it comes to flatpicking. But as this arrangement shows, "Prelude No. 1 in C major" works quite well as a picking etude. I find it's best played with consistent down-up picking throughout, for a fluid and relaxed feel. This results in a challenging upstroke on the sixth and 14th notes of each measure, but the piece is meant to be taken at a contemplative pace, and with a little practice the upstroke will come naturally.



COURTESY OF ALAN BARNOSKY

As for the fretting hand, while many of the measures are based around common open chord shapes like C and G7, some of the passages can be tricky. For this reason, I've provided occasional fingering suggestions in the notation. Work through these portions slowly and repeat each measure until you feel confident with the chord shapes. Also, check out the accompanying video for more thoughts on the left-hand approach.

The magic from this piece comes from letting the notes ring out to reveal lush harmonies and overtones, so you'll want to hold each chord

shape in the fretting hand whenever possible. This is easier in some places (like measures 1–4) than in others (the monster F#dim7/G chord in bar 28). In some measures there are repeated notes on the same string (bar 6), and in these instances keeping notes ringing on other strings is essential to maintain the sustain found elsewhere in the arrangement.

Take it slow and enjoy the complex harmonies created by these ringing chords. Not many of Bach's pieces are adaptable to guitarists who play with a pick, so this one is well worth the time to learn and appreciate. **AC**

## PRELUDE NO. 1 IN C MAJOR

J.S. BACH

Moderately slow

Sheet music for "Prelude No. 1 in C Major" by J.S. Bach, adapted for guitar. The music is in 4/4 time and features a moderately slow tempo. The arrangement includes a treble clef and a bass clef. The key signature is C major. The music is divided into two systems. The first system includes measures 1-4, with a C chord above measures 1-2 and a Dm/c chord above measures 3-4. The second system includes measures 5-8, with a G7/B chord above measure 5, a C chord above measures 6-7, and an Am/c chord above measure 8. The notation includes a treble clef and a bass clef. The bass clef has a 'B' on the line, indicating a B-flat. The music is written in a style that is accessible to guitarists, with a focus on the right-hand technique. The notation includes a treble clef and a bass clef. The bass clef has a 'B' on the line, indicating a B-flat. The music is written in a style that is accessible to guitarists, with a focus on the right-hand technique.

[illegible][illegible]

The musical notation for the guitar solo in "Hotel California" is shown in standard staff notation. The solo begins at measure 18, marked with a treble clef and a key signature of one flat (B-flat). The notation is divided into three measures, each with a chord symbol above it: G7, C, and C7. The first measure (G7) contains a series of eighth and sixteenth notes, including a triplet of eighth notes. The second measure (C) continues the melodic line with similar rhythmic patterns. The third measure (C7) concludes the solo with a final note and a triplet of eighth notes. Below the staff, a tablature line shows the fret numbers for each note, with some notes marked with a '3' indicating a triplet.



21 **Fmaj7** **F#dim7** **A<sup>b</sup>dim7**

24 **G7** **C/G** **G7sus4**

27 **G7** **F#dim7/G** **C/G**

30 **G7sus4** **G7** **C7**

33 **F** **G7** **C**

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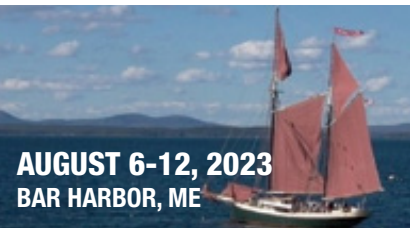
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# Jenny Jenkins

A fun and breezy song dating back to the early 1800s

BY MAURICE TANI



Maurice Tani

Back in the days before radio, recorded music, and DJs for hire, social gatherings such as quilting bees and church functions often featured fun interactive tunes where young people could safely socialize with each other. Dating back to at least the early 1800s, “Jenny Jenkins” is one of these dialogue songs, a vehicle for a boy to ask a girl to dance. The boy would sing the first lines, picking a color, and the girl would have to make up a response that rhymed. If she couldn’t come up with a rhyme, she would dance with the boy.

“Jenny Jenkins,” which has been covered by the likes of Jerry Garcia (with David Grisman) and Lisa Loeb, is as simple as it is sweet. I’ve arranged it here in the guitar-friendly key of D major using just three chords, including the common open D and G shapes. Instead of a regular open A, I play a more colorful-sounding A7sus4—an A7 chord with the fourth (D) replacing the third (C#). These three voicings share the common note D (string 2, fret 3), which rings throughout for a lovely droning effect.

As for the picking hand, I start the song with a light boom-chuck, playing single bass notes on beats 1 and 3 and upper-string chord strums on beats 2 and 4, like notated here in the song’s four bar intro. As seen in the accompanying video, I use that same pattern throughout.

With the boy-girl dialogue of “Jenny Jenkins” in mind—and through the magic of modern picture-in-picture technology—I had my singer-actor friend Margaret Belton join me to respond to my relentless grilling regarding her wardrobe plans. Roll, Jenny Jenkins, roll! **AG**

## JENNY JENKINS

TRADITIONAL, ARRANGED BY MAURICE TANI

### Intro

Chord diagrams for the Intro:

- D** (xx0132)
- A7sus4** (x01030)
- D** (xx0132)

### Verse

Chord diagrams for the Verse:

- D** (xx0132)
- A7sus4** (x01030)
- D** (xx0132)
- A7sus4** (x01030)

1. Will you wear white, oh my dear, oh my dear? Will you wear white, Jen - ny Jen - kins?  
 2. Will you wear blue, oh my dear, oh my dear? Will you wear blue, Jen - ny Jen - kins?  
 3-6.. See additional lyrics





**D** **G** **Chorus D**

9

I won't wear white, for the col - or's too bright. } I'll buy me a fol - de - dol - dy,  
I won't wear blue, the col - or's too true. }

2 0 2 4 0 0 2 2 0 2 4 5 4 4 4 4 4 4 4 4

\*In the video, the F# is sometimes sung as E through the first half of bar 14.

13

til - dy, tod - dy, seek a dou - ble, use a cause a roll to find me.

4 4 4 4 4 4 4 4 4 4 4 4 4 4 2 2 2 4  
5 5 5 5 5 5 5 5 5 5 5 5 5 5 0 0 2 5

**A7** **D**

16

Roll, Jen - ny Jen - kins, roll. *play six times*

0 2 0 2 0 4 4 2 4 5 4 5

**A7** **D**

20

Roll, Jen - ny Jen - kins, roll.

0 2 0 2 0 4 4 2 4 5 4 5 2 3 2 0 0

3. Will you wear red, oh my dear, oh my dear  
Will you wear red, Jenny Jenkins?  
I won't wear red, it's the color of my head
4. Will you wear black, oh my dear, oh my dear  
Will you wear black, Jenny Jenkins?  
I won't wear black, it's the color of my back

5. Will you wear green, oh my dear, oh my dear  
Will you wear green, Jenny Jenkins?  
I won't wear green, for it's a shame to be seen
6. So what will you wear, oh my dear, oh my dear  
What will you wear, Jenny Jenkins?  
Oh I'll just go bare with a ribbon in my hair

William Eaton with his double-neck harp guitar

## MAKERS & SHAKERS



ROBERT DOYLE

## A Rugged Individualist

How William Eaton, director of the Roberto-Venn School of Luthiery, has made a life in music

BY KATE KOENIG

**I**n the mid-1970s, William Eaton, then a recent business school graduate coming from a long line of bankers, opted to pursue a decidedly unconventional path. He teamed up with fellow guitar enthusiasts John Roberts and Bob Venn to form one of the first guitar-making schools, Roberto-Venn School of Luthiery, in Phoenix, Arizona—all while living in the desert in his Citroën station wagon. Eaton also started building his own unusual instruments, like a harp guitar and a double-necked quadrophonic guitar. He would throw the latter—along with a Honda generator, a few amps, and a handful of 100-foot cables—in his car, drive out to remote locations, and play for hours, the canyons and wildlife serving as his only audience.

While Eaton has made a bunch of similarly unconventional instruments in the decades

since then, some even displayed in museums, he has helped students learn how to build much more straightforward guitars at Roberto-Venn. Graduates from the school have gone on to work in virtually every part of the guitar industry, including the highest ranks—to name just a couple, Mike Voltz, former vice president at Gibson, and Steve Nall (profiled in the January/February 2023 issue), director of manufacturing at Collings Guitars.

Eaton has also been musically active over the years, having released more than two dozen albums inspired mainly by the natural world, and earning four Grammy nominations. He plays solo, frequently collaborates with Native American flutist R. Carlos Nakai, leads the William Eaton Ensemble, and performs with the Wisdom Tree Ensemble and the Electric Harp Guitar Group.

I spoke with Eaton over the phone to learn more about his unique background in the guitar world. In our conversation below, he reflects on how he got into lutherie, the evolution of Roberto-Venn, and his ongoing passion for unconventional instruments.

### What is your history with music?

I grew up in Lincoln, Nebraska, and started playing ukulele when I was seven years old. Not long after that, I took up tenor and standard guitars. I played in bands in high school, but when I went to college, I sold my instruments for some reason. I wish I still had my stereo Gibson ES-345, as well as my burnt red-orange Fender Jaguar—both would have been very valuable instruments at this point. But I missed playing the guitar and my parents sent a

## Roberto-Venn School of Luthiery



STEVEN DAVIS

little Goya parlor. Then I wanted a larger guitar. I went to store after store for four or five months, and I couldn't find one that I liked. None of them were easy to play, as they just weren't set up properly.

### How did you get into lutherie?

At Arizona State University [ASU], where I was studying business, a guy was going door to door showing a guitar he had made. I almost bought it on the spot, just because it was set up properly. He had made the instrument at Juan Roberto Guitar Works, not too far from the university, and I thought I could find a guitar there that was even better. I remember going in and just being transfixed by the smell of rosewood sawdust and the sight of all the guitars hanging in this old Quonset hut.

That's where I met John Roberts. He thought I was there to sign up for his guitar class—right on the front of the building there was this little sign that read "Juan Roberto Guitar Works: Build Your Own Guitar." And I said, "No I just came to see if there are other instruments for sale." I remember going back

to my dormitory and thinking, "When will I ever have a chance to make a guitar? I should do this." And that's when I decided to make my first guitar; it was 1971, and I was 20. If I had bought any one of those instruments that I saw at Juan Roberto Guitar Works, I never would have been interested in making one. I loved that guitar, and I played it every day. I thought it would be a one-time experience. I couldn't imagine myself being a guitar maker or having anything to do with that.

### How did it turn into something other than a one-time experience?

After ASU, as an MBA student at Stanford University, I was in a new enterprise project management class, and we had to write a business plan. Just two nights before I got that assignment, I had this very vivid dream about building another guitar. I remember getting up early in the morning and making a drawing of it. When I got the assignment to do a business plan, I thought, "Well how about a guitar-making school?" I figured I'd go down to Phoenix, build the guitar that I saw in my

dreams, and gather information from John Roberts and Bob Venn, who had come to work with him by that time. I put together a 60-page business plan and handed it in for my assignment. Later that spring, I decided to really do the guitar-making school, and John and Bob both were all for it. So that's how it all started.

### Did you have any other lightbulb moments?

I remember seeing a documentary about Harry Partch, an American composer who designed and built some very unique instruments, mostly percussive and a few stringed instruments [many from found objects], and he was one of the first 20th-century composers to work with microtonal systems. [Partch invented an octave with 43 pitches. —*ed.*] After I saw the documentary, a lightbulb went off for me, and I wanted to make stringed instruments that were completely different. So, I built a quadrophonic guitar—a 12- and seven-string double-neck.

### What were things like for you in the early days of the school?

I would've been 24 years old when we started



the school in June of 1975, and that's when I graduated from Stanford. I was as attracted to starting that business as I was going to live in the desert. I had zero money, and I remember making \$100 a month for the first four months, so it was economically efficient to live there with my vehicle, just outside of Phoenix. It was

**'I wanted to make stringed instruments that were completely different!'**

—WILLIAM EATON

a very fertile period in my life of understanding the biosphere and understanding how to live in a space. I learned all about the desert flora and fauna and what you could eat, surviving on everything from cactus fruit to mesquite husks and mesquite beans. I was content with my little knapsack and a sleeping bag, and that's how I existed for a couple years.

**What was your role at the school at that time?**

I was the person handling the business aspects; I didn't want to go in the red, so we didn't borrow money. What I brought to the school was budgeting and marketing. Using a pen name, I wrote a story about the school that *Guitar Player* magazine published [in 1977]—back in those days you could just submit an article—a long feature with photos. That kept students coming to our school for years.

**What shaped the school's evolution?**

Well, if you look at the start of the school, you see something that comes into shape almost by accident. John Roberts brings his wood to Arizona and starts an import hardwood business. Meanwhile, Ron Carriveau and Carl Samuels are two guitar makers in Phoenix. John meets them independent of each other, and they both tell him, "You've got this amazing stockpile of wood for guitars, Nicaraguan rosewood and mahogany." We ended up using these woods for more than a decade during the early school's foundation. So just starting from the resource, you have something that's almost self-guided.

John had never imagined being a guitar maker and by that time he would have been in his late 50s. Bob Venn worked with Semie



COURTESY OF WILLIAM EATON

Eaton plays his quadrophonic double-neck guitar, 1978

Mosely of Mosrite guitars. Bob knew Leo Fender and was early on in a career of making electric guitars and repairing guitars. So, the school was shaped by two unique individuals. And then a third person, myself, comes along that knows enough about business to make it into the administrative side of the school.

So the shaping of the school was by three individuals who had a connection with one another and found their way to what a school is. And what has also shaped that experience still to this day is the requirement that students build one acoustic and one electric guitar—and nothing from a kit. They see each instrument right from the beginning, from the wood milling and understanding of where the trees come from.

**It sounds like knowing the sources of the woods is an important part of the work.**

When you cut open a tree, you have a whole different reverence for the experience of that. I started the Wisdom Tree Institute, a resource site where I've collected information about how trees communicate with one another, the lives of trees, and responsibilities for guitar makers in understanding some of those relationships. [wisdomtreeinstitute.com]

**Tell me about your work as a player.**

I can't say I'm a very good technical player. I studied classical guitar for a while, and I was

pretty good, but I wasn't a Christopher Parkening or a Julian Bream. And when I made that first unusual stringed instrument I thought, "Hmm, I can make stuff on my own and it's just going to be what it is." It was mainly for the love of sound and sound texture and tone poems and improvisation that kind of created a career in music and performance, which I never really imagined—I've made around 27 albums now.

My latest album is called *Spiral Rendezvous*. My good friend R. Carlos Nakai plays Native American flute on it—he came up with that title. It was serendipitous because he didn't know that I'd been working on a spiral-shaped instrument. I ended up using it on the album, and if you listen to the title track, where there's a modulation from C major to C minor, you can hear the strings on either side of the fretboard. It's kind of sitar-like, but when you strum those it's a very rapid cascade of notes. Because of how close the strings are, it sounds like a sitar.

**Are you still building instruments, and if so, what's on your workbench?**

I've always got one on my bench. I'm currently working on a spiral Fibonacci instrument. There are six banks of strings, with six to eight strings on each bank, and when you pluck a bank you get a kind of chord cluster. I'm kind of anxious to get finished, because it's a different concept altogether.

AC

# CAN WE ADD YOUR NAME TO THE LIST?

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# On Top of Things

**How to deal with bulging soundboards and moldy cases—plus, do pickguards impact guitar tone?**

BY MARTIN KEITH

**Q:** How do I overcome the issue of guitar tops bulging upwards, thus raising the string action, no matter how many bridge or truss-rod adjustments are applied?

—Seán Ó hArtaigh

**A:** Top bulging or distortion is without question the most common culprit behind long-term playability issues on flattop guitars. In both modern and vintage instruments, the constant string pull eventually causes the top to deflect forward, raising the action beyond what is comfortable. The short-term fix is to cut the string saddle lower, which can help, but this lowers the effective break angle of the string, which in turn reduces the strings' leverage on the top. If overdone, this can result in diminished volume and response.

The proper repair for a bulging top is a neck reset, which involves disassembling the neck-to-body joint, usually using steam; recutting the neck angle; and regluing the neck in its new position. This repair is commonplace, and most competent luthiers have some experience doing it. But it is still a pretty invasive job, and can be expensive.

In recent years, a new approach has emerged, largely led by expert repairman TJ Thompson. This technique involves softening and reshaping the glue joint between the top and bridge plate, which is the thin but hugely important sliver of hardwood inside the guitar underneath the bridge. When done properly, a considerable amount of top bulge can be remedied without taking apart the neck joint, which is a great time saver and spares the guitar considerable risk.

It might be better to replace a moldy case than attempt to clean it.



BILL EVANS

There are products on the market that are designed to counteract top bulging. The most well-known is a sort of truss system that attaches under the bridge and transfers the string pressure to the guitar's tail block. Some manufacturers have even built this system into brand-new guitars as a hedge against future issues. Although it may be possible to design a guitar to perform effectively with such a system in place, most are not built to have their tops constrained in such a fashion, so it is quite possible that installation of such a device would have a noticeable impact on the tone and response of the instrument. That said, if it made the difference between a playable guitar and a wall hanger, it might still be

an appropriate choice in certain cases. For guitars with any kind of vintage pedigree or value, I would hope that a good repairperson would advise the owner to pursue a more thorough solution such as a neck reset.

In closing, this is a great opportunity to remind all responsible guitar owners to keep careful tabs on the humidity in their homes or guitar rooms. An overly damp guitar will often exhibit considerable bulging in the top, whereas an excessively dry guitar top will flatten out or even become concave in some cases—and will often crack shortly thereafter. If you are experiencing high action and bulging tops on multiple guitars, the best place to start would be by monitoring your



Martin Keith

## GOT A QUESTION?

Uncertain about guitar care and maintenance? The ins-and-outs of guitar building? Or another topic related to your gear? Ask *Acoustic Guitar's* repair expert Martin Keith by sending an email titled "Repair Expert" to [Editors.AG@stringletter.com](mailto:Editors.AG@stringletter.com) and we'll forward it to Keith.



If your question is selected for publication, you'll receive a complimentary copy of *AG's Acoustic Guitar Owner's Manual*.



Most factory-built guitars have thin pickguards that don't adversely affect tone.



DANIEL BARNES

environment, and dehumidifying if your levels are too high. A good safe midpoint would be 45% relative humidity at normal room temperature (about 70 degrees Fahrenheit). Small digital hygrometers are cheap and widely available; I recommend buying several and storing them in a few different places near your guitar storage. In many cases, climate control is all that is necessary to restore guitars to proper playability.

**Q:** I bought a used guitar whose case has developed a strong moldy smell. I've tried leaving the case out in the sunshine for several days, washing it with vinegar, etc., and the smell always returns. I'm worried that if I replace the case, the guitar will carry mold spores to the new case and I'll eventually have the same problem. Do you have any suggestions?

—Charles Boyd

**A:** I've had several clients come to me with this specific issue. To be frank, there is nothing I know of that can completely remove the mold smell from a

case. Nice hardshell cases are a good investment, and usually worth the money, so I'd suggest simply buying a new case for the guitar and getting rid of the old one.

If the guitar itself is suffering from the moldy smell, it may need a good cleaning. This should be done with care, as some common household products can cause issues with lacquer finishes. I'd suggest starting by removing the strings, taking care to set aside the saddle and bridge pins in a safe place. Clean all the finished/polished surfaces first with a damp rag—not wet enough to drip, but just damp. A drop of liquid dish soap can be helpful. Clean with small, circular strokes, and pay attention to make sure you are not leaving streaks or scratches in the finish. Avoid cleaners with any kind of solvent, alcohol or otherwise, as these can damage lacquer. If you really need the big guns, naphtha (aka lighter fluid) is about the safest solvent I know for most common guitar finishes.

The harder area with moldy guitars is the interior. I've seen more than a few with visible green mold inside the box itself. Water/soap and other cleaners can leave stains on the unfinished wood inside a guitar, so I usually use

alcohol on a paper towel to quickly wipe down the interior, as far as can easily be reached through the hole. Don't overdo it!

In some cases, I have finished by polishing the guitar with a very mild abrasive compound such as Novus 2 scratch remover. The very fine grit of this compound helps to scrub off any final mold that may be on the surface of the instrument. It also usually leaves a nice shine, though you may have to scrub through a few layers of grime before it starts to look glossy.

**Q:** How does a pickguard stuck to the top of the guitar affect its tone? I'm wondering if it restricts movement, causing that area of the soundboard to be less active.

—Hugh Hinde

**A:** This is an interesting topic, and I have no doubt that opinions vary in the field of guitar makers. I have always built my instruments without pickguards, but most of the guitars I repair have them. Pickguards are known culprits for a handful of issues, most notably the infamous B-string crack that is the all-too-frequent result of the plastic guard shrinking over time, and splitting the adjacent wood of the top. Guards have varied in thickness across different eras, makes, and models. I've worked on paper-thin Martin pickguards, and other guards that were almost comically thick.

I feel that the average factory guitar is not built lightly enough in the upper bout to be substantially affected by a fairly thin pickguard, though a carefully tuned luthier-built instrument could certainly be. Mass and stiffness would be the main factors contributing to a change in tone. In most cases, the thin plastic guards on most flattops are very light and quite flexible, and also usually glued on an area of the top that is braced quite heavily to reinforce the soundhole. In the case of the average Taylor or Martin, I cannot honestly say that I've noticed a meaningful difference in tone when the guard is removed for repair. A 1960s Gibson Hummingbird I worked on was a different story, but that guard was nearly 1/8-inch-thick flexible vinyl, and weighed quite a bit.

Unfortunately, most guitars do not permit an easy comparison with and without their pickguards, as they are usually glued on, and in many cases, painted in underneath the lacquer itself. Whatever their effect may be, it is part of the overall tonal picture that defines these classic models, and I've certainly never listened to a good prewar Martin that I thought would be improved by removing its pickguard!

AC

# Bourgeois Touchstone OM Vintage/TS

**A collaboration with Eastman Guitars results in a brilliant new guitar with an old soul**

**BY KATE KOENIG**

**B**ourgeois Guitars has a reputation for making some of the highest quality instruments on the market. The boutique company handcrafts roughly 500 guitars a year, retailing for an average of around \$7,500 each. That's why players will be excited to learn about the new Bourgeois Touchstone series, made up of two models—a dreadnought and an OM—that are priced at less than half that amount. Five additional models will be released in 2023, and eventually there will be a full line.

The Touchstone series is the result of a collaboration between Bourgeois and Eastman Music that began in the fall of 2019, when the two companies decided to create some new models together, with each taking part in the building process. The guitars' tops are constructed and voiced at the Bourgeois workshop in Lewiston, Maine, then sent to Eastman's factory in China, where luthiers complete the instruments to Bourgeois' specifications. The finished guitars are then sent back to Bourgeois and set up alongside the company's regular production models.

Having checked out a Touchstone OM Vintage/TS, I can say that this collaborative process has resulted in an excellent tradition-inspired guitar with a relatively affordable price.

## VINTAGE-INSPIRED SPECS

The Touchstone OM Vintage/TS tips its hat to the prototypical orchestra model that C.F. Martin introduced in 1929—that company's first steel-string with a 14-fret neck joint. The Touchstone's all-solid construction includes an old-growth Alaskan Sitka spruce top with Adirondack spruce bracing, along with Indian rosewood back and sides. The guitar sports classic appointments like herringbone purfling, a black-and-white stripe rosette, and ivoroid bridge pins.

While the Touchstone OM has a standard scale length of 25.5 inches, the nut width is 1-23/32 inches, slightly narrower than the



PHOTOS COURTESY OF BOURGEOIS GUITARS



standard 1.75-inch width. The modern-feeling neck has a slim profile and a satin finish, making it easy to grip and slide up and down freely while playing. The review model came set up with medium action, which I found to be very comfortable.

As would be expected from Bourgeois, the overall build quality of the Touchstone is excellent. The guitar is relatively lightweight and has great intonation, and the Schaller GrandTune tuners are smooth and responsive. The fretwork is perfect, with no sharp edges along the sides of the fingerboard, and the body's beautifully applied gloss urethane finish contributes to the guitar's classy appearance and high-quality feel.

### EXTENSIVE RANGE

Like all good OM's, the Touchstone has an even balance from string to string, and strong projection; for a smaller-bodied guitar, it has great volume, without being overpowering. The bass response is more impressive than that of some of the dreadnoughts I've played recently, and the low end helps to produce layers of warm, resonant tones when strummed.

**The bass response is more impressive than that of some of the dreadnoughts I've played recently.**

This impressive responsiveness extends itself past the low end and mids to the high end, which rings out amidst the other ranges whether you're strumming, flatpicking melodies, or fingerpicking. When strummed, the guitar's different frequencies complement each other beautifully—an effect that was especially noticeable when playing folkish tunes like Bob Dylan's "Like a Rolling Stone" or the jazzier "Coyote" by Joni Mitchell.

One of my favorite flatpicking riffs is the main lick from Tommy Emmanuel's "Flatt Did It," and when I played it on the Touchstone, I was able to produce a strongly voiced melody that projected boldly without much effort. In terms of fingerpicking, the lower strings are bolstered by that same powerful low-end



voice that is obvious when strumming. This is particularly helpful when playing songs like Mississippi John Hurt's "Avalon Blues."

Lately, I've been writing in alternate and open tunings, and the Touchstone OM resonates gorgeously in response to them. I tried the guitar in drop D, double drop D, DADGAD, and my favorite, C G C F C E. All these tunings sounded just as rich as when I played the guitar in standard tuning, thanks to its ebullient overtones, and there was no murkiness when I dropped the bottom four strings to C, G, C, and F.

### THE BOTTOM LINE

The Bourgeois Touchstone OM Vintage/TS, which streets at just under \$3,000, is a traditional-style orchestra model that gives players access to a beautiful vintage tone with excellent projection and tonal balance. Between its powerful voice, classy appearance, and relative affordability, the Touchstone is a prime choice for any guitarist looking for an OM that will make a strong impression on listeners.

AC

### SPECS

**BODY** Alaskan Sitka spruce top; Adirondack spruce bracing; Indian rosewood back and sides; 2.2" bone saddle; ebony bridge; ivoroid bridge pins; high-gloss urethane finish

**NECK** 14-fret mahogany; ebony fretboard; 25.5" scale length; 1-23/32" bone nut; Schaller GrandTune nickel tuners; satin urethane finish

**OTHER** Hardshell case; D'Addario EXP16 Coated Phosphor Bronze Light strings (.012–.053)

**PRICE** \$2,969 street

**MADE IN** USA and China

bourgeoisguitars.com



# Phil Jones Bass X4 Nanobass Combo Amplifier

Big sounds come in small packages

BY EMILE MENASCHÉ

Discounting novelties and low-watt amps for electric guitar, the Phil Jones Bass X4 Nanobass 35-watt digital combo is physically the smallest amp I've tested since the Trace Elliot Acoustic Cube came out about 20 years back.

Technology has come a long way since then. Not only is the Jones lighter, it uses advanced digital processing to produce better headroom and more accurate sound reproduction than I would have dreamed about from a small combo back in the day. Despite housing a four-inch speaker—more on this later—it has reported frequency response of 68Hz–15Kz.

While it has the word bass in its name, the Nanobass seems ideally tuned for acoustic guitar. I gave it a go with a range of instruments and pickup types, and even threw in some mandolin for good measure. But before we get into that, let's take a look at the basics.

## A TIGHT PACKAGE

Measuring around 6 x 8 x 8 inches and weighing just over five pounds, the Nanobass can literally fit into a backpack. In keeping with its travel-friendly footprint, the amp's internal power supply is designed to adjust automatically to international voltages from 100 to 240 without the need for external converters.

The Nanobass may be small, but it is a tight package—and its design plays a role in making its four-inch speaker outperform its modest size. Our test model had a white cabinet with a black top-mounted control plate, but black and red cabinets are also available. The cabinet is made from MDF, which the company says is stiffer than plywood, and covered in rugged Tolex.

Save for the AC plug, all the connections and controls are top mounted. Inputs include a high-impedance 1/4-inch jack for guitar, a mini 1/8-inch aux jack, and Bluetooth 5.0 (aptX HD). It was easy to pair my iPhone with the



COURTESY OF PHIL JONES BASS



amp without having to search for the instructions. There's also a stereo mini-jack for headphones. I was a bit surprised not to find an XLR DI output, which is becoming more common on bass and acoustic amps.

Despite the amp's tiny footprint, the controls are full-sized and have a sturdy tactile feel. In addition to the power switch, there are nicely spaced knobs for input level (with LED clip indicator light), aux/Bluetooth level and mode, individual controls for bass, mid, and treble, and master volume (which controls the instrument input's level separate from the aux input). The panel layout made it easy to adjust the sound by feel without having to bend down and look at the controls.

## IN ACTION

Talk about serendipity: The Nanobass arrived in the middle of rehearsals for a performance of Eric Clapton's *Unplugged* album, and my role was to cover parts played by both Clapton and Andy Fairweather Low. As a result, I played a Takamine nylon-string, a Taylor GTe, a Breedlove Pursuit Exotic (in open G for slide), a Taylor T5 12-string, and an Epiphone F-style mandolin. The show includes some songs with a full band, including keyboards, drums, electric bass, percussion, background vocals, and more, so rehearsals provided a pretty good test for the amp.

In terms of volume, the amp was able to cope with the band in a rehearsal setting. I wouldn't say it was loud enough for a club gig without PA

support, but it was ample for the rehearsal room, and more important, it was consistent and clean when I turned the volume knob up.

If you play a range of acoustic guitars with different pickup systems, you'll know that switching instruments can often mean making big adjustments to the electronics. Not only do you have to contend with the different output levels or EQ curves from various types and brands of pickup/preamp combinations, you have to account for the tone of the instruments themselves.

I tested the amp with the guitars plugged in directly and with an Eventide H9 Harmonizer providing some reverb, but did not use outboard compression or EQ. Most of the time, I left the tone controls relatively flat and used the instruments' onboard tone controls to find a balance. At the rehearsals, I slightly boosted the highs and the bass to help the guitars sit in the mix. For the most part, this set-and-forget approach worked. But there were times when the amp's EQ solved problems more effectively than a guitar's onboard controls.

With my Takamine, I used the Nano's EQ to dial out finger squeaks and some of the percussive parts' harsher qualities while keeping the clarity I needed for solos. The low strings sounded round and warm as well. With the Taylor, I did a lot of strumming and took one very bluesy solo. Chords sounded well-balanced. The Nano didn't quite produce the air you'd get from amp/PA with a tweeter, but it didn't sound dull or nasal like an electric guitar amp might.

As for the Breedlove, I used the Nanobass to emphasize the midrange for slide playing. The low D in open-G tuning came through especially nicely, and the EQ also helped me reduce the papery treble that can sometimes plague my Epiphone mandolin when I plug it in.

My Taylor 12-string is a hybrid that offers both acoustic-electric and electric tones. In this case, the lack of a tweeter was a plus. The acoustic settings were still well-balanced, while the electric tones weren't as strident they would be through a tweeter-equipped amp or PA.

While I normally ignore the aux inputs on an instrument amp, testing out the Bluetooth on the Nanobass actually revealed the little amp's low end when I used it to listen to a few tracks on Spotify.

## THE BOTTOM LINE

It doesn't weigh much, but the Nanobass is no lightweight. Its ability to produce warm, clean lows really impressed me for an amp its size. Nicely made and intelligently designed, it's a good option for rehearsal, and the aux input can work for solo gigs with backing tracks. The amp gets loud enough for coffeehouses, places of worship, and other small venues. For larger gigs with a band, I really wish it had a direct output because its front end would make a very nice preamp feeding a PA. But with a street price just under \$360, the X4 Nanobass more than exceeds expectations. [pjbworld.com](http://pjbworld.com) **AC**



## PLAYLIST



**Rory Block**  
*Ain't Nobody Worried*  
(Stony Plain Music)

songs that are already very closely associated with a pantheon of great women singers: “I’ll Take You There” (Mavis Staples), “Midnight Train to Georgia” (Gladys Knight), “I’d Rather Go Blind” (Etta James), “Dancing in the Street” (Martha Reeves), “Love Has No Pride” (Bonnie Raitt, whom Block calls “the best singer on earth”—no argument here!), “Fast Car” (Tracy Chapman), “You’ve Got a Friend” (Carole King),

**‘I do not do these songs to create a better version than the original. Those versions are enshrined in the halls of Musical Heaven!’**

**—RORY BLOCK**

and more. A prolific songwriter through the years, Block also includes a version of her own “Lovin’ Whiskey,” which she describes in the liner notes as “the song that launched my career . . . that earned me a gold record and has remained my most popular and requested song for over three decades.”

Of course, we fully expect the guitar-playing to be sensational, but this time out I was most blown away by Block’s singing. She fearlessly tackles the vocal gymnastics of some of the greatest singers of the modern era, and more often than not honors the originals while adding her own particular brand of spice. In her liner notes she faces the challenge head-on: “Why attempt to resurrect such untouchable greatness? I suppose the answer is the same reason I dare to do Robert Johnson, Bessie Smith, and other early blues legends. I do not do these songs to create a better version than the original. Those versions are enshrined in the halls of Musical Heaven. I do these songs because I play the music I love most.”

That passion can be felt throughout *Ain’t Nobody Worried*, from the simmering soul showcase “I’ll Take You There” that opens the album to the delicate fingerpicked version of Elizabeth Cotten’s “Freight Train” that closes the set. Against the odds, Block really pulls this off. That said, I would be remiss if I did not mention that I wish there were a lot more and longer guitar solos, just to open up the tunes a bit. I say, let it rip, Rory!

For more reviews of more new recordings, visit, [visit acousticguitar.com/albumreviews](http://visit.acousticguitar.com/albumreviews).

## Soul Power

**Rory Block salutes ten of her favorite women singers**

**BY BLAIR JACKSON**

**T**his third installment in Rory Block’s Power Women of the Blues series takes the acoustic slide guitar master and blues belter in some unexpected but completely rewarding new directions. Over the course of around three dozen album releases since 1975, Block has primarily been in a deep country-blues bag. She is justifiably famous for her outstanding tribute albums to such well-known early country blues masters as Robert Johnson, Son House, Fred McDowell, Reverend Gary Davis, Skip James, and Booker “Bukka” White, as well as many lesser-known figures from that world.

The previous Power Women of the Blues releases include *A Woman’s Soul: A Tribute to Bessie Smith* (2018) and *Prove It On Me* (2020), with interpretations of tunes by Memphis Minnie, Ma Rainey, and a host of more obscure women singers, like Lottie Kimbrough, Rosetta Howard, and Helen Humes.

There’s still plenty of blues feeling on *Ain’t Nobody Worried* in Block’s singing and playing, which ranges from wonderful slide work—tasteful, never showy, and always somehow perfect for the song—to fingerpicked and strummed acoustic. The guitars are her Martin Rory Block Signature OM-40s, as well as a Martin OM-28V. Block uses the Martin Gold Plus VTII acoustic pickup system and Martin medium-gauge MA150 Authentic strings. Her slide is a 15mm deep well socket, and she uses a Shubb capo.

A product of the lockdown era, the album finds Block handling everything we hear: the multiple guitar parts, the stacked lead and backing vocals, bass, and percussion/drum programming, all expertly recorded and layered by Rob Davis at Kentucky Studios, in Sandy Hook, Kentucky.

The biggest surprise is the bold, genre-crossing song choices, heavy on iconic popular



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# Manzer Sunflower Guitar for Ukraine

A luthier's heartfelt gift to the people of a war-torn country

BY DAVID MCPHERSON

When Russia began its invasion of Ukraine in February 2022, Linda Manzer felt hopeless and wanted to do something—anything—to help. So the renowned Canadian luthier, who over a four-decade career has built custom guitars for the likes of Pat Metheny and Bruce Cockburn, turned to what she knows best. “I made a guitar,” she says. “That was my therapy.”

Ukraine's national flower, the sunflower, has become a symbol of resistance in the war. The name for the guitar came to Manzer after watching a news clip of a Ukrainian woman defiantly offering a heavily armed Russian soldier a handful of sunflower seeds to put in his pocket, so that flowers might grow on his body if he died on her country's soil.

Manzer built the Sunflower Guitar in just 29 days using materials she had on hand, including a set of Indian rosewood sides and a European spruce soundboard. While she says that it's an ordinary guitar in a lot of ways, there are details that set it apart from anything else she has built.

Symbolizing the flag of Ukraine, the fretboard markers are blue and yellow, as is the intricate headstock inlay, featuring a Van Gogh-inspired sunflower, which Manzer hand-painted with watercolor pencils. The inlay also includes 23 pieces of mother-of-pearl, along with the luthier's signature. “I spent almost as much time doing the inlay work as I did making the guitar,” she admits.

Manzer initially wanted to auction the Sunflower Guitar and donate the proceeds to humanitarian aid efforts for the Ukrainian people. Instead, thanks to an anonymous \$100K donation, she came up with a better idea—to pass the instrument through the hands of high-profile musicians who would encourage their fans to give to this worthy cause.

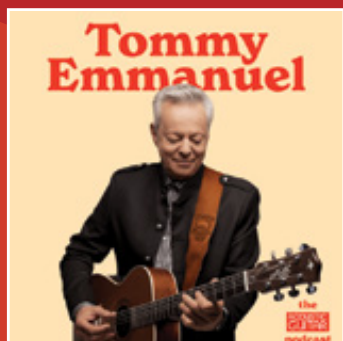
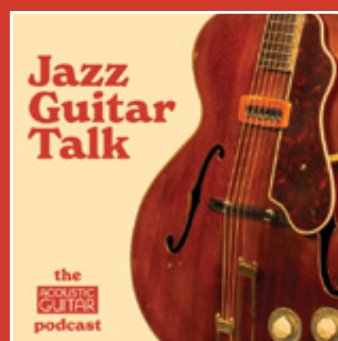
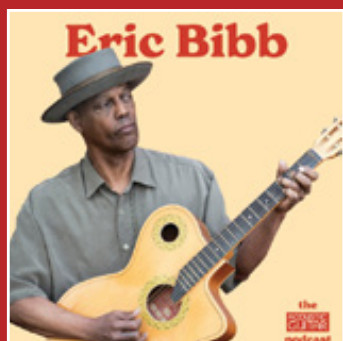


MARNI FRIESEN

Since last July, when the Sunflower Guitar made its first public appearance at the Mariposa Folk Festival in Canada, the instrument has journeyed across North America. It's been played by Bill Frisell, Julian Lage, Pat Metheny, and others, all of whom have autographed the guitar's blue-and-yellow Hoffee case. Eventually the instrument will arrive in

Ukraine as a gift to its citizens. “My hope is that this guitar can inspire the global music community to give generously to humanitarian relief,” Manzer says.

*At press time, the Sunflower Guitar for Ukraine had raised \$125,000. You can make a donation at [sunflowerguitar.com](http://sunflowerguitar.com).*



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